

IT'S ALL ABOUT FOOTBALL:
THE LIVED ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES OF UNDERGRADUATE AFRICAN-
AMERICAN FOOTBALL PLAYERS

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Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Higher Education Administration and Student Affairs of School of
Education
Indiana University
June 2011

Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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April, 21, 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank my family for their support throughout my years of higher education. My parents sadly did not survive to see the completion of this but I will be ever grateful to them for their encouragement over the years, even if they did not fully understand what it all meant. My son Ewan was born one year after I first enrolled at San Diego City College and has never known me not to be studying. His understanding has been crucial to my academic success.

Maria, my wife, has been the most supportive spouse imaginable; I am beholden to her for so much. She has given up a lot to come on this journey with me and words cannot convey my appreciation. This work is dedicated to her.

I have to thank my committee for all their support. John Bean has been the greatest doctoral advisor I could have asked for, this would never have been finished without him. The world of Higher Education will be a poorer place with his retirement. Enjoy it. Bruce Jaffee is also retiring and the Indiana University Athletic Department will lose the best Faculty Athletic representative in the nation. Jesse Steinfeldt went above and beyond reasonable expectations with me to clear up bureaucratic issues I encountered. For that, and his thoughtful suggestions for my edits I am very thankful. Megan Palmer agreed to be on my committee probably not realizing how APA challenged I am, for all her editing assistance and recommendations for improvement in my writing I am indebted.

To my friends and peers who have assisted me I would like to acknowledge your generosity. Kirk Markey for his editing, Eric Love for mentoring and friendship, Joanne Bunnage for all her help. Ian Rickerby has always been a shoulder to moan on and for

that I am grateful. To the San Diego State CBB class of 2000 I will always remember you and feel a part of something special. Professors Maria Nieto-Senour, Phil Rafael, the late Denny Ollerman and especially Michael Loewy will always be in my heart. Jesus Nieto changed my life educationally more than anyone else, thank you so much.

For the last seven years I have encountered many great people and am privileged to call them peers, the Jens, Anitra, Linda, Dustin, Amanda, Mike, and Travis are some of those in the trenches fighting the fight. In particular I would like to thank Amelia Noel-Elkins, for her encouragement and mentoring.

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Media focus on intercollegiate athletics has reached an all time high. To many, the entire institution is now defined by this tiny part of campus life and the credibility of higher education as a whole can be jeopardized by the actions of a few. Most of the literature published on academic issues in intercollegiate athletics has focused on identity development, graduation rates, and financial issues.

This study examines the lived academic experiences of a group of six African-American undergraduate football players at a Division1 university. The participants in the study were all students on the campus for at least one academic year before taking part in this work. The academic performance and motivation of African-American male student-athletes have received considerable attention in the higher education literature over the past two decades. This qualitative, phenomenological study will explore the perceptions and experiences of football players who are struggling academically. The purpose of this study is to attempt to understand the lived experiences of a group of football player student-athletes who are struggling with academic requirements.

The study describes how for these participants athletics is the be-all and end-all of their existence. Close relationships with family members and team mates are key to academic success and the role of coaches is pivotal. The positive and negative consequences of interactions with faculty, staff and non-athlete students are presented with positives and negatives for each being presented and behaviors contributing to success and failure are explored. Implications for the findings are offered for parents, high schools, Division 1 football coaching staffs, postsecondary

administrators and faculty, athletic department administrators and staff, and administrators within the NCAA.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview of the study

As a guest of the athletic department where I work, I was invited to attend a college football game between two in-state rivals. A fleet of buses made the trip and I looked around at my fellow passengers, an assortment of coach's wives, department staffs and a few players who turned out to be kickers on the team. As the bus pulled away I was conscious of police motorcycles with their flashing lights beside the bus. We had an official police escort consisting of 4 motorcycles and 3 cars.

For the next 120 miles we did not once slow down. The police stopped traffic at every freeway on ramp and road intersection. I was awed by all of this and felt as though I were part of a presidential entourage. This sentiment remained as I reflected on the experience over the weekend. I had worked in an athletic department academic unit for several years and was aware of the intense media scrutiny and associated pressures around intercollegiate athletics. I asked myself, *how does an 18 year old man from the inner cities of America handle this? Does this play any part in the academic struggles that I had experienced first-hand with these students?* In some ways, this doctoral dissertation documents a side of an athletic department that is rarely told.

Statement of the Problem

There is a long held stereotype of the 'dumb jock' on American college campuses (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita & Jensen, 2007). These student-athletes are perceived to gain admission to institutions of higher education solely by dint of their athletic abilities. Anyone who has ever looked at a playbook quickly realizes the complexity inherent to college sports and the intellectual acumen required to be successful on the field or court.

It is the lack of preparation prior to college matriculation and the huge physical and time demands made upon student athletes that render their academic success so difficult.

Typically, the response to these issues has been to throw considerable resources at the problem in terms of study centers, specialist staffing, and tutors. Despite these attempts, many student-athletes still practice academic avoidance much to the chagrin of their teammates, coaches, and academic advisors. Media attention toward intercollegiate athletics is increasingly intense and creates a need for a commensurate acceleration in commitment of the student-athletes themselves. If higher education is to try to halt the decline in the significance of academics among student-athletes, then more research is needed to try to understand the day-to-day experiences of this population.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to attempt to understand the lived experiences of a group of football player student-athletes who are struggling with academic requirements. Studies on student-athlete populations are common but there is little research into why they do what they do with regard to negative academic practices. Why would football players on scholarship not attend class? Why would they not complete and/or hand in assignments? What is the pattern emerging from their avoidance behaviors? None of these questions have been discussed adequately in the current research.

The primary research question was: how do you perceive and describe your experiences of being an intercollegiate student-athlete who is struggling academically? The following questions also guided the design and execution of this study: 1) Share your experiences as a student and an athlete before coming to this university. 2) How would

you describe the attention and support you received for accomplishments in athletics? 3) Tell me how members of the team treat academics? 4) Tell me how you treat academics? 5) Talk about times when you engaged in behaviors that helped you earn better grades 6) Talk about times when you engaged in behaviors that you knew would hurt your grades 7) Are the members of the coaching staff supportive of your academics? 8) Are members of the coaching staff unsupportive of your academics?

Significance of the Study

Media focus on intercollegiate athletics has reached an all time high. There are daily scandals that involve coaches and student-athletes with slurs and allegations that are posted all over headline news programs and the internet. To many, the entire institution is now defined by this tiny part of campus and the credibility of higher education as a whole can be jeopardized by the actions of a few. Most of the literature published on academics within intercollegiate athletics has focused on areas such as identity development, success rates regarding graduation, and financial issues (Benford, 2007; Frank, 2004). For example, athletic identity research has focused on how those students who identify more strongly with athletics than they do academics often struggle in both the academic and social arenas (Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, & Bimper, 2011) and that athletic identity and the resultant struggles are typically higher among African-American student-athletes (Clopton, 2011). Some research in this area has examined links between athletic identity and mental and physical well being. Miller and Hoffman's study (2009) reports that athletic identity leads to positive scores in areas of mental health, results that agree with previous findings.

Much of the justification for having intercollegiate athletics centers on graduation rates and the positive financial benefits that a successful athletic program brings to the institution. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has long claimed that student-athletes graduate in higher numbers than their non-athlete counterparts (Eckard, 2010). The focus of many of the reports on graduation success within the student-athlete population examines the claims by the NCAA. Reports indicate that the NCAA graduation numbers are skewed by the differences in the two groups and that comparison should not be attempted (Ferris, Finster, & McDonald, 2004; Rishe, 2008). Arguments exist regarding the financial benefits of intercollegiate athletics; Suggs (2009) reports that athletics are a great promotional tool for universities, but that the benefits cannot be measured because it is impossible to gauge the effects accurately. Former high ranking college administrators have covered intercollegiate athletics in their memoirs with Bok (2003) reporting that universities have sacrificed academic values in the name of having success on the field. It is not clear that winning in sports even has any effect on donations (Frank, 2004). Little research has explored the lived experience of student-athletes. This study will delve into those everyday experiences that student-athletes have while enrolled as undergraduate students, practicing and performing at a very high athletic level while under intense media scrutiny.

The issue of poor Black graduation rates, particularly at predominately White institutions (PWIs), has been the focus of considerable scholarly research. According to a special report in the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2002), African-American enrollments in higher education have never been higher with more than 1.6 million African-Americans enrolled in the United States. While White students graduate at a rate

of around three out of every five, entering Black students only graduate at a rate of two out of every five. There is clearly a need for more studies into this state of affairs, and this study of African-American football players will be a meaningful addition to the literature.

This study will add an important human dimension to existing literature and supply future readers with historical evidence about this side of student life in the early 21st century. Understanding these experiences will help to inform campus and athletic department policy. Lastly, this study is important to me, because my career is in an academic unit of an athletic department, I myself 'live' college sports. As someone with a passion for education, and life-long-learning I think it is imperative that I be a part of academic reform within intercollegiate athletics. I do believe that every student-athlete I have met with in my 7 year career is capable of earning a rigorous undergraduate degree, yet so many do not.

Definitions

There are a number of terms and designations used throughout this dissertation that may be unfamiliar to persons who not closely involved with intercollegiate athletics. The following definitions are included to assist the reader.

- 1) African American- Those of African ancestry born in the United States. In this study all of the 6 participants identified as being either African-American or Black. The terms are used interchangeably in this study.
- 2) Division 1- The highest level of competition within intercollegiate athletics. At the current time news stories report that the elite Division 1 institutions have

revenues which far exceed those at the bottom end and there could be plans to break away for many.

- 3) Eligibility- Eligibility refers to a student-athletes formal qualification to participate in intercollegiate athletics. Rules are set by the NCAA, conferences, and individual institutions. One common element is that all student-athletes have to be enrolled full-time in college.
- 4) National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)- The governing body of intercollegiate sport, they make and enforce regulations that are related to roster sizes, rules, eligibility, recruitment, and financial aid.
- 5) Revenue sports- Sports within intercollegiate athletic which generate revenue for the athletic departments. Depending on the institution this can vary but on most campuses football, and men's basketball earn revenue. In this study, all the athletes are football players.
- 6) Student-Athlete- Student-athletes are typically undergraduates (but can be graduate students) enrolled in a college or university who participate in NCAA sanctioned intercollegiate athletic events. In this sample all were undergraduates.
- 7) Predominately White Institutions-Colleges and universities where the vast majority of enrolled students are White Caucasian.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter One underscores the context of the study, the research problem and purpose, and the importance of the study. In addition, key terms are defined. Chapter Two provides a review of previous literature regarding sport, student-athletes, Black student experiences at PWIs, race as it relates to intercollegiate sports, and sports coaches

in college athletics. Chapter Three describes the methodological approach as well as the data collection and analysis procedures. The participant profiles are provided in Chapter Four. This is where I introduce each individual; who are they, what makes them tick, what were and are their lives like. The individual profiles are condensed within the findings in Chapter Five into five thematic clusters. Chapter Six discusses the findings and reports thematic clusters that appeared from the transcriptions of the interviews. Chapter Seven concludes the study with the strengths and weaknesses of the study and implications for practice and future research.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter I will examine the literature relevant to my study. The following areas of research assisted in informing my thinking and interviews with the student-athletes participating in this research study. Moustakas (1994) argues that researchers preparing to carry out phenomenological studies should review the professional and research literature. While the literature may have to be revisited as interviews are conducted, it is important going forward that the researcher be aware of the relevant themes that he or she may encounter. After introducing the focus of the research, the first section of this review will give an overview of the history of sport in America and cover sport's cultural importance before focusing on intercollegiate athletics. Current conflicts between the governing body of college sports, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), and the rest of the stakeholders are included here.

The second section looks at the population of student-athletes and how it has evolved in relation to intercollegiate athletics. The commercialization of college sports and its continuing de-emphasis on academics are of special interest here. The ongoing conflict between campus faculty and staff and the athletic department is documented. Given that the population of the participants in this study is entirely comprised of African American students, the next section covers race as it pertains to Black students attending Predominately White Institutions (PWIs).

Research focus

Every year at NCAA American Division 1 universities many freshman student-athletes are admitted to institutions where academically, and sometimes culturally, they

will struggle from day one. This situation can often be due to poor intellect, bad academic motivation, poor preparation, or a variety of transitional issues common to all freshman student-athletes and non-athletes throughout the country (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The governing body of Division 1 college athletics, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), has tried to put in place a system whereby student-athletes are encouraged to make academic success their priority. The reality however is that as admission standards rise at universities numerous incoming student-athletes are less and less ready to succeed in the classroom (Gurney, Tan, & Winters, 2010). A lot of athletic departments throw a lot of money at this problem in an attempt to try to quickly get the student-athletes every advantage academically. Despite this support, some student-athletes who may be identified as being at-risk academically choose to engage in behaviors which can be considered negative and self-destructive and often lead to harmful consequences (Dowling, 2001).

There are many reports of negative behaviors found in the literature and include not attending class; reports show that class attendance is a vital component in student success, particularly in the formative college years (Gayles & Hu, 2009; Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). Among student-athletes, another detrimental conduct is not completing assignments, or sometimes completing the assignment but not turning it in on time or at all (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2003). Being an active participant in class is shown to lead to better grades and students failing to do this regularly perform less well (Watt & Moore, 2001). Pascarella and Terenzini (1996) report that meeting with professors outside of class time gain academic benefits that lead to student success. Poor time management has been a significant contributor to academic issues for college

students (Ender & Wilkie, 2000), and general disruptive and unruly behavior or sleeping in class has often resulted in poorer academic performance (Sperber, 2000).

Virtually everyone involved in intercollegiate athletics agrees that this behavior is not in the self interest of the student: coaching staff, academic support staff, university faculty, and even teammates and peers, as well as the individual student-athletes themselves. However, with each entering cohort the behavior occurs every single semester. The focus of this study is to identify student-athletes engaging in these behaviors and study their academic experiences with a view to trying to understand the phenomenon.

Sport in America

No research into intercollegiate athletics would be complete without a reference to the bigger picture of sports in society. In the book, *Sport, Play & Ethical Reflection*, the author Feezell (2004) poses the question, “Why are sports so popular?” The book researches mostly current trends in attendance at sporting events, television coverage and ratings, morals and ethics and recent scandals. The author concludes that sport is essentially an escape from reality and has an “absurd quality,” whereby recreational sport is pursued as if it were the most serious business of our lives. Coakley (1998) studies the cultural importance of sport and argues that sport is more than a reflection of society and influences every aspect of society, from business to the arts. Sport’s popularity can be attributed to the belief that sport prepares youth for future success in our competitive society, teaching discipline, sacrifice, courage, cooperation, hard work, perseverance and other desirable traits (Richards & Aries, 1999; Svare, 2004). These traits include

discipline, networking, and a strong work ethic (Watt & Moore, 2001). Some researchers report that participation in intercollegiate athletics improves one's abilities to deal with the rigors of college (Richards & Aries, 1999). Ridpath's (2006) study shows that college coaches believe that their student-athletes develop healthy habits through their involvement in athletics, habits that transcend sport and enter meaningfully into their post-college lives.

Sports business in America and the rest of the world has exploded since the 1950s. At that time, the average salary of a professional athlete was less than the median wage of the working man. Today, millionaires make up a large percentage of all professional athletes, particularly in the three dominant American professional sports of football, baseball, and men's basketball (Smith, 2007). In recent years, sports have received considerably greater media coverage, including more and more prime time news coverage that heralds sporting achievements and a large amount of negative press. Recent scandals have not affected the popularity of sports; interest has been increasing despite allegations of cheating and drug use (Zimbalist, 2006). A considerable number of Americans believe that universities place too much emphasis on athletics (Greenburg, 2003) and intercollegiate athletics have been developing with increased interest and television revenue. The vast majority of the recent academic literature on college sports depicts commercialized athletics as a destructive force within American higher education (Dowling, 2001).

Given the nature of this study into academic issues within the student-athlete population, it is important to include some background into the official administration of intercollegiate athletics. William Bowen & Sarah Levin (2003) give a comprehensive

report on the history and contemporary functions of the NCAA referencing its own philosophy statement for Division 1 athletics:

[The division 1 program] strives in its athletic programs for regional and national excellence and prominence. Accordingly, its recruitment of student-athletes and its emphasis on and support of its athletics program are, in most cases, regional and national in scope;

Recognizes the dual objective in its athletic program of serving both the university or college community (participants, student body, faculty-staff, alumni) and the general public (community, area, state, nation);

Sponsors at the highest feasible level of intercollegiate competition one or both of the traditional spectator-oriented, income producing sports of football and basketball;

Believes in scheduling its athletic contests primarily with other members of division 1, especially in the emphasized, spectator-oriented sports, as a reflection of its goal of maintaining an appropriate competitive level in its sports program;

Strives to finance its athletic program insofar as possible from revenues generated by the program itself. (p. 38)

There has been considerable doubt among the nation's academic faculty regarding the NCAA's claims. These faculty members, along with other critics, claim that intercollegiate sports are rife with corruption and at odds with the goals of higher education (Benford, 2007). Faculty initiatives to combat abuse within intercollegiate athletics have resulted in the formation of several organizations such as The Drake group and The Knight Commission whose overarching goal is to reform intercollegiate athletics.

Intercollegiate sports had its inception in the nineteenth century, when a rowing event in 1852 between Harvard and Yale signified the first formal intercollegiate sporting event. Interestingly, early incarnations of intercollegiate sports were organized and

administered by the student body (Benford, 2007). Outside attention soon took over, bringing with it vested interests and commercialization. There was subsequent slide away from amateurism in its purest form. From the beginning, university faculties have been at odds with college athletics. The first attempt, in 1883, to regulate the “un-academic” side of college athletics was documented by Harvard University President Charles Eliot.

“Colleges are presenting themselves to the public, educated, and uneducated alike, as places of mere physical sport and not as educational training institutions” (Zimbalist, 1999, p. 21). Sack (2003) reports that in 1898, faculty from institutions that would soon become The Ivy League met to discuss ways to stop the undermining of education by intercollegiate sports. Throughout the twentieth century, various attempts were made by faculty associations, university administrators, consortiums, and commissions to reform intercollegiate athletics, but all were in vain (Benford, 2007). The most visible of the modern reform collections has been The Knight Commission and The Drake Group. The Knight Commission are a group of mostly senior faculty and administrators who focus on a model of academics first and responsible spending within college athletics (Knight Foundation, 2007). The Drake Group is a national collection of faculty members concerned with reforming college sports (Smith, 2007). Formed in 2000, the Drake Group has supported educational best practices for student-athletes and has acted on behalf of faculty who have been ruled against in disputes with athletic departments (Sack, 2008). The claims of both the NCAA and its detractors are all addressed by a variety of researchers within the Drake Group literature.

One of the more noteworthy voices in the literature is Allen Sack, a former student-athlete football player at Notre Dame. After college, Sack was drafted by the

National Football League and played successfully as a professional football player. He then entered academia and became a tenured professor at The Pennsylvania State University (Sack, 2003). His research contends that college athletics builds its success off the back of the college athletes (Sack, 2003) and that big business has taken over college sports and higher education itself. He further relates how, from the 1970s on, colleges began seeing students as “customers,” (Sack, 2008, p. 161) a characterization that would have highly insulting to faculty and staff in years past. Zimbalist (2006) continues that the monopoly that is the NCAA cares little for the student and is concerned mostly with the huge pools of money that have turned coaching and administrative spots into highly sought after positions.

In another article, Dowling (2000a) bemoans the function of boosters in collegiate athletics, arguing that their role has gotten completely out of hand, to the detriment of Division I colleges nationally. Consequently, a win-at-all-costs mentality has become the norm as numerous reports of academic corruption have come to light within programs (Kihl, Richardson, & Campisi, 2008). Kihl et al. (2008) continue with an extensive literature review that documents many instances of corruption within university athletic departments. Recent scandals involving corruption and illegal payments have come to light all over the country and include highly respected research institutions such as the University of Minnesota, Ohio State, and Virginia Tech (Dowling, 2001). There have also been arrests for criminal misbehavior involving hundreds of student-athletes every year, the offenses ranging from petty vandalism to serious sexual assaults (Eitzen, 2009). These actions have far-reaching consequences on both society and academia because they seriously damage the once respectable reputation of higher education.

English Literature professor Murray Sperber pioneered research into the decline of academic standards within the higher educational system. He emphasized the role that intercollegiate athletics played in this deterioration, tracing the institutional values as they shifted from academia to football or men's basketball programs (Sperber, 1990; 2000). Sperber documents the ease with which student-athletes can maintain eligibility by enrolling in filler and remedial classes and opting for less rigorous majors. Professors feel pressure to pass student-athletes and this, when combined with grade inflation, has encouraged the regular student body to expect high grades for little or no academic performance. Sperber (2000) reports that contemporary students are attracted to the big research universities, where they hear from peers that there is little academic rigor. There is a Catch 22 inherent in this situation.

Students are comfortable with current conditions, which demand little of them in the way of academic obligations outside of the classroom, yet they complain of boredom during their spare time. Sporting events are seen by the student bodies as being one of the few worthwhile events offered to the campus community. They soon take on greater significance and become social occasions, ones with alcohol and aberrant behavior often at the forefront. National and local media promote wild behavior at intercollegiate events and students choose to "represent" their respective institutions by trying to out-do their rivals with boorish and bad behavior. Sperber criticizes those currently administering higher education for allowing this state of affairs. Further, he contends that as far as the easing of academic rigor, the student-athletes are not to blame; they merely take advantage of the circumstances. This theme is continued by Shulman and Bowen (2001), who report on the admissions process for student-athletes. They discuss how admissions

standards are often waived, particularly at elite Ivy League institutions, resulting in lower standards and the vitiation of the student experience. Dowling (2001) points out how basketball players admitted to Duke University average 500 points less on the SAT than the average Duke incoming freshmen. This immediately gives rise to the question: “How can those students possibly compete in the classroom?” The studies by Sperber and Shulman & Bowen bring impressive academic credentials to the literature and their research certainly has some merit. It could be argued that they bring a sort of utopian ideal of how things should be, an ideal that, in practical terms, may not be attainable. Shulman & Bowen also chose to concentrate on the elite side of academia, as opposed to the big research institutions, often negatively referred to as “sports factories,” which tend to have much greater investment in intercollegiate sports.

Another contributor to the literature regarding intercollegiate athletics is a book by former University of Michigan president James Duderstadt. Here, he details his experiences with sports at Michigan and challenges the culture of athletics (Duderstadt, 2000). Duderstadt was a Michigan student-athlete before becoming a tenured faculty member there and eventually advancing to the university presidency. He relates the extent to which campus morale and athletic success were linked, and claims that students eventually begin to measure their self worth by the success and failure of the football and men’s basketball teams. Ridpath (2006) further explored the relation between campus happiness and sporting success, reporting on the disconnect between academics and athletics. He found that most stakeholders in higher education agree that athletics is an important part of campus life for many undergraduates. They also agreed that some students based their college choice on the traditions of the college’s athletic program and

a perceived four years of sporting event attendance and success. Duderstadt continues to look at how student-athletes have become exploited by the commercialization of sports, by coaches, and the media. He reported that intercollegiate athletics had become “a corrosive example of entertainment culture” (p. 46) and fought to change this. In a quest to redress the balance between academics and athletics, Duderstadt encountered considerable opposition from the student body, alumni, and boosters. After a contentious struggle, Duderstadt was ultimately replaced as university president at The University of Michigan. This was despite a majority of faculty and staff praising him for his efforts. The true power held by the stakeholders of college intercollegiate athletics was revealed.

Student athletes

Every university campus has a variety of subgroups, such as ethnic student populations, Greeks, athletes, etc. Researchers have granted considerable attention to all of these subgroups, including student athletes. They are generally regarded as a distinct population and are described over and against groups of non-athletes. Intercollegiate sports have been a part of American higher education since the nineteenth century and have long been considered a valid part of the educational program. By extension, the relationship between student-athletes and non athletes has been considered an organic and interconnected one (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). Ender and Wilkie (2000) conducted a study in which they compared student-athletes to students who were not varsity student-athletes and had no athletic connections. Four areas of separation between athletes and non-athletes were identified: time commitments to sport, academic preparedness from high school with athletes often being less ready for college, involvement in campus life or non-involvement with athletes regularly avoiding campus life outside of sports, and

the ‘fishbowl’ atmosphere in which many athletes live as their sports are often headline news. Ender and Wilkie (2000) maintain that, “becoming a college athlete at all levels of intercollegiate sports is a lifestyle commitment” (p.142), and that athletes have to overcome considerable adversity to succeed. Potuto and O’Hanlon (2007) used the National Study of Student Engagement data to extrapolate the data of over 2400 respondents who self-identified as student-athletes. This data suggested a different conclusion, one that contradicted reports that student-athletes were short-changed when it came to their overall college experiences. In fact respondents to this study did not agree that their college experience was compromised by time commitments and other athletic requirements. Rather, this study painted a picture that the majority of student-athletes were satisfied with their degree of student engagement.

Athletes are far from a homogenous group and contain young men and women from different teams, each with their own distinct peer cultures. For example, revenue sports such as football and men’s basketball typically have their own special team traditions and views of how to be a college student-athlete. These conceptions may differ radically from sports such as tennis and swimming, a phenomena referred to as “athletic mini-fraternities” (Bowen & Levin, 2003, p.109). Academically, this can have far-reaching consequences with some sports enjoying great success in the classroom while others do not.

In recent years, the commercialization of college sports has meant that academics and athletics have become disconnected. As a result, the identity of student-athletes has evolved much more toward its athletic side. Student-athletes have to negotiate all the same issues relating to college that non-athletes do and in addition deal with participation

in their sports. This participation can bring a variety of pressures, injuries, and demands on their time, such as travelling to and from events and daily practices (Watt & Moore, 2001). Many of the student-athletes who join large, successful intercollegiate athletic programs do so after having been high school stars and being perceived as the “big man” on their respective high school campuses (Person, Benson-Quaziena, & Rogers, 2001). Typically, this same student finds himself or herself transitioning to college under vastly different conditions. They are often relegated to the bench or have limited playing time and are thus forced to renegotiate athletic superiority. Reforms by the NCAA have limited student-athletes to twenty hours per week of practice, but many do voluntary practicing on top of this and allegations exist regarding coercion by coaches in this area (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001). Nishimoto (1997) states that a majority of today’s student-athletes construct their identities by the student-athlete culture because they are “functionally, psychologically, and physically” (p. 96) separated from the general student population. A strange paradox exists here-- student-athletes receive special attention as a result of their athletic talent, yet the segregation of athletics from the student body blocks a more “normal” student experience. Adler and Adler (1985; 1991) have conducted several studies with student-athlete populations, and report that for student-athletes, peer culture has hindered academics and social experiences. Athletic identity has been a predictor of poor academic, social, and behavioral competence (Ryska, 2002) and the positive academic image of students at elite and highly selective schools has not translated to athletes at those institutions (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). Those who get too wrapped up in their athletic identity can end up on a perilous path marked by extremes of elation, frustration, and disappointment (Harrison, Harrison, & Moore, 2002). Howard-

Hamilton and Sina (2001) report on the inherent dangers present in a situation where the sense of self-worth of young student-athletes hinges on making big plays and winning games.

Conflicts between academics and athletes have been studied with a view to achieving balance; of note is Coakley's study (1998), in which it is suggested that the only way to achieve success as both an athlete and as a student is to synthesize the roles, neglect one or both of the roles, or have the student withdraw from one or the other. Bowen & Levin (2003) report that nationally, student-athletes room together in dormitory floors full of student-athletes, study in separate academic study facilities, and socialize primarily with their athletic peers. Taken collectively, these factors lead to a state of segregation. Killea-Jones (2005) conducted a study of football players at an 'elite' north east Division 1 research institution in which it was found that if student-athletes were given sufficient time to devote to academics and if academics were valued as highly as sports, then an increase in the student role would occur. The authors did address certain limitations of this study. They were due to problems of specificity and small sample sizes and the difficulty encountered generalizing this study elsewhere. With the current demands placed upon student-athletes, they cannot be successful; as long as this situation continues, student-athletes will be prone to stigmatization regarding their academic abilities. This negative stereotyping could be the basis for the perpetuation or aggravation of already weak academic performance.

Despite common perceptions which suggest that the academic performance of student-athletes is inferior to that of the overall student population statistics regularly show that grade point averages (GPA) and graduation rates for the greater student-athlete

population are competitive and often exceed those of other students (Watt & Moore, 2001; Shulman & Bowen, 2001). Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, and Hannah (2006) conducted a study comparing the educational experiences of student athletes and non-athletes, the institutional variability, and the relationship between engagement and competition level. Using the National Study for Student Engagement (NSSE) they found that educational experiences were comparable, the impact of being an athlete was similar across institutions, and Division III student-athletes were more likely to be engaged than student-athletes in other divisions. A limitation in this study was the inability to determine which sports were played by respondents.

Universities are often reluctant to share figures regarding the nature of degrees awarded to many football and basketball players who graduate in less rigorous academic majors and with weak GPAs (Smith, 2007). Equally, there is a dearth of studies into the value of those degrees; just what many ex-football and basketball players do with their general studies and recreational sports degrees is relatively unknown at this point. Shulman & Bowen (2001) devote a chapter to this theme in their book *The Game of Life*. Yet they focus on high achieving student-athletes who go on to attain success in the business world and beyond. There is no mention of academically struggling student-athletes picking up diplomas at the sports-factories, the cynical nickname for many big research universities. Smith (2007) reports that African-American student-athletes tend to lose their economic viability at the conclusion of their athletic careers and consistently underperform compared to their White peers after college.

Gurney et al. (2010) conducted a study into the factors leading to academic success for a group of specially admitted students. The sample (N=183), was conducted

over six years and included all specially admitted student-athletes at one institution.

They found that this group had success in areas of retention and persistence if they got off to a good start academically. They further found that for those special admit students in the high revenue sports, academic performances were lower than those special admits in the non-revenue sports. The stigma of dumb jocks is therefore a very real perception, both in the regular student body and within faculty ranks. Stereotypes exist, among students and faculty alike, that student-athletes are academically unqualified, unintelligent, and socially impotent (Benford, 2007; Watt & Moore, 2001).

Prejudice is defined as having a negative attitude toward a distinct social group; a stereotype is a generalized perception that all members of a specific social group share the same characteristics (Baucom & Lantz, 2001). Student-athletes are equipped in the latest, expensive brand-name sportswear. Generally, they proudly show off around campus and can be identified easily by their attire. In addition, they are typically required to identify themselves to professors as athletes to negotiate travel schedules. Given the physical size of most of the individual football and basketball players, who suffer from the majority of the stereotyping, it is impossible for these young men to be missed on campus (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007). The classroom demeanor of many student-athletes is often considered disrespectful and disturbing by faculty members. This may add to a tendency to discriminate against the student-athlete by students or faculty. The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics found that 39 percent of faculty surveyed reported that they believed student-athletes to be academically unmotivated. 32 percent claimed that institutions make academic compromises in the name of athletic success within the sports of football and basketball

(Knight Foundation, 2007). Simons et al. (2007) demonstrate that stigmatization against athletes has led to a perception among student-athletes that they automatically receive lower grades from many faculty solely for being athletes. The figure is higher still among African-American student-athletes who believe their grades are unjustly lower, a finding replicated in a similar study by Knapp, Rasmussen, & Barnhart (2001). While the student-athletes feel discriminated against, Knapp et al. (2001) reported that, paradoxically, the student body believed student-athletes were the recipients of favorable bias and more lenient grading. They also reported the presence of resentment from the students that the athletes do not deserve to attend the institution, at least not intellectually. The student body reported that student-athletes treat the classes and professors with disrespect with frequent episodes of truancy, tardiness, and early exits from classes. This belief by the students is reinforced in a study by Cohen (2007), who notes that at the University of Texas only 12 percent of the incoming student-athlete class in 2007 was in the top 10 percent of their high school class compared with 71 percent of the overall incoming freshman class campus wide.

Many large research universities with successful athletic programs offer easy classes. These classes are taught by instructors whom have been callously referred to as jock-sniffing professors, who are said to give out a high grades for little or no work (Benford, 2007). Reformer Jon Ericson summarizes the problem:

At the heart of the academic corruption program in college sports is the lie that a university can enroll an athlete who is woefully underprepared for higher education, allow him to miss numerous classes, come tired to many others, work thirty hours a week in a demanding and distracting business, spend millions of dollars to hire graduate assistants to sit in classes and take notes for him, surround him with tutors who select courses, help with research and writing

papers, place these helpers in athletic departments because they (the athletes) won't go to the tutors if they have to walk up to campus, engage in special pleading with him with his professors, and say we provide this athlete with a college education. (Quoted in Benford, 2007, p. 16; Svare, 2004).

In addition to these negative reports on academic standards and rigor, there has also been research into other areas in which intercollegiate athletics does not present itself favorably.

Within the non-athlete population, a large number of students believe that student-athletes gamble on the outcome of their games. They also believe that they regularly cheat on academic work by having tutors do their work for them (Knapp et al., 2001). Dowling (2000a) reports that, in some cases, work was completed for student-athletes by tutors, but that it was done so unbeknownst to the student-athletes. Generally, morals and ethics within intercollegiate athletics seem to be lower than within the rest of the campus population. Knapp et al. (2001) had interesting results in their study into different perceptions on integrity within sports. A sample of student-athletes and regular campus students were questioned in areas such as the value of intercollegiate athletics, criminal behaviors, economic matters relating to college sport, and ethics and morals in sport. The student-athletes scores were significantly higher in favor of good morals than those of their non-athlete counterparts showing the disparity between the two groups in areas relating to ethics.

Smith (2007) finds that for African-American student-athletes, the negative stereotyping is even stronger and other research produced a model showing that race plays a significant factor in exacerbating already significant pressures in academic success in high profile college sports (Upthegrove, Roscigno, & Charles, 1999). Brown

et al. (2003) had different findings and reported that athletic identity supersedes any racial identity. This means that most student-athletes consider themselves to be an athlete first and foremost over any recognition with racial groups. Comeaux and Harrison (2007) report on the limited interactions between faculty and student-athletes outside the classroom, and on the disproportion of White-to Black faculty ratios in big research universities. This disparity can lead to the facilitation of negative stereotypes with Parham (1996) finding that institutionalized discrimination exists within races of student-athletes and against the higher profile revenue sports. Obviously, the subject of race has significance within the research framework. As this study features African-American student-athletes, it is necessary to include studies regarding this population.

Black College Students at Predominately White Institutions

Given that most, if not all, successful Division I football and men's basketball programs are considered predominately White institutions (PWIs), it follows that this study will benefit from a review of the history of African-American participation in higher education

During the era of slavery in the United States, education was mostly denied to African-Americans. Long laborious work hours left little time for slaves to learn to read or write, and the act of reading or writing by slaves was criminalized and punishable by death (Wiggins & Miller, 2005). It took a civil war and the later passage of Amendments 13, 14, and 15 to give Blacks the rights afforded to other citizens. Sweeping civil rights legislation beginning with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and continuing through the mid-1960s, gave civil rights to Blacks that were protected by law (Wilson, 1996).

Black student participation in American higher education was influenced by the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890. The vast majority of African-Americans attending colleges went to Historically Black Colleges and universities (HBCUs), with only 30 Blacks graduating from PWIs between 1826 and 1890 (Faegin, Vera, & Imani, 1996). In the early 1940s, only 10 percent of Black college students attended PWIs (Hawkins, 2000). The Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* led to the end of 'separate but equal' conditions within American higher education and began the influx of African-American students into PWIs (Allen, 2005). In the 1960s, social movements led to the creation at PWIs of Black student associations, Black studies departments, and White students began to be exposed to Black culture (Williamson, 1999). The ratio of African-American students at PWIs was still small and more legislation in the form of affirmative action used race as a valid criteria in college admissions (Allen, 2005). By 1984, 80 percent of Black college students attended PWIs, yet on many Division 1 campuses, this is regularly less than 10 percent of enrollment (Hawkins, 2000).

Despite these measures, in contemporary times African-Americans continue to lag behind their White counterparts in areas such as admission, retention, and graduation (Allen, 2005). The disparity has not deterred movements from trying to undermine affirmative action type programs. The combination of critics who object to the assistance afforded to students of color and the highlighting of the poor academic performance and of Black students means that African-American students attend college in an environment where they cannot always feel a strong sense of belonging. This 'guest' status has been the focus of many studies involving African-American students attending PWIs.

The literature reviewed here contends that for African-American students attending PWIs, race and racism are still a major part of the college experience. Feagin et al. (1996) examined how PWIs remained bastions of 'Whiteness' and found that this continues to create adversity for students of color. The authors further observe that racism at these institutions is both subtle and explicit, and can be institutionalized at every level of academia. According to the authors, this is a significant problem and is the primary reason for poor retention rates for Black students attending PWIs (Feagin et al., 1996). In 1991, Adler and Adler reported that Black students attending PWIs felt alienation and isolation due to the social structure contained within PWIs and Hawkins (2000) reports that these circumstances had not changed. For African-American student-athletes, this climate is not beneficial to their development as students.

Bourdieu (1986) described this as the sociological concept of cultural capital, a term that refers to a social relation within a system of exchange that includes the accumulated cultural knowledge that confers power and status. Hage (in Dolby, 2000) expands on this concept by conceiving of whiteness as a form of cultural capital, one that is not fixed and rigid but expands as a "shifting set of social practices" (Dolby, 2000, p. 49). He conceptualizes the nation as a circular field, with the hierarchy moving from the powerful centre (composed of 'whites') to the less powerful periphery (composed of the 'others'). The others are forced to compete with each other for a place closer to the center. In higher education the minority student can identify with this concept.

Another theme relevant to this study is that of racial microaggressions which exist within the literature of African-American students attending PWIs. Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso define microaggressions as "subtle insults (verbal, non-verbal, and/or visual)

directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (p. 60).

Solorzano et al. report how African-Americans in college experience microaggressions both in the classroom and socially.

Race in Intercollegiate Sports

According to Smith (2007) in the book *Race, Sport & the American Dream*, which covers the experiences of African-Americans in all sports, modern American sports, “suffers from all kinds of bureaucratization, commercialization, greed, exploitation, racism, sexism, homophobia, ethnocentrism, and a silly form of misdirected patriotism” (p. 11). In turn, all of the above shortcomings affect the African American student-athlete even more significantly. While in the 1950s, around 1 percent of all student-athletes were Black, recent studies have shown that over 40 percent of football and men’s basketball players are (Smith). African-American athletes have made huge inroads in sports with outstanding role models from Jackie Robinson and Muhammad Ali to Michael Jordan. Others have chosen to enact sensational protests on world stages, acts which were intended to highlight, but have been seen as disruptive tactics by many (Sack, 2008). The research into the current circumstances regarding race and college sports suggests that despite greater numbers of African Americans participating in college athletics, little progress has been made in the conditions under which they live while at universities (Edwards, 1980; Harrison, 2000; Smith, 2007).

African Americans are widely reported as being underrepresented on American college and university campuses. Yet they are overrepresented on the high profile intercollegiate athletics fields and arenas (Snyder, 1996; Smith, 2007; Sack, 2008). Many

studies cite racial and ethnocentric biases for SAT results. These biases are thought to contribute greatly to African American students scoring in the lower percentiles. This in turn leads to issues surrounding college admissions (Person & LeNoir, 1997). This can lead to issues of low self-esteem, a stunting of personal and social development, and diminished intellectual performance (Snyder, 1996; Harrison et al., 2002). Upthegrove et al. (1999) report on the greater issues within the African American communities, such as higher concentration in poorer communities, disparately lower levels of parental education and family income. These factors lead to lesser attendance and representation in college. In America today, African Americans constitute around 13 percent of the population, yet less than 4 percent of all physicians and lawyers and 6 percent of managerial professionals (Smith).

A cultural dynamic that is addressed is the notion that for many Black youth, college attendance or educational success is a sign of selling out the Black community or “acting White” (Harrison et al., 2002; Smith, 2007). This widespread issue is known as oppositional culture and means that some young people are angry with peers who try to break away from traditional bonds (Smith). It is common to ridicule those who have achieved academic success (Adler & Adler, 1991). The subsequent lowering of academic aspirations can only be expected. As a society, we have now reached a stage where many African Americans, at an early age, believe that the greater American society views their education as threatening and that superiority in sport is their only chance for advancement (Harrison et al., 2002). Person & LeNoir (1997) report that over sixty percent of African American student-athletes surveyed were encouraged by parents to prioritize athletics over academics. Most American college campuses are more

conducive to African American student-athletes than to African American non-athletes. There are more financial resources for athletes and success in sport is often on the chief motivations to persevere (Person & LeNoir). These factors contribute to a lack of preparation for college, unrealistic athletic goals, and the belief that college attendance is more about athletic talent than intellect.

The process by which young African Americans are pushed to prioritize sports over academics has been studied and is referred to as “channeling” (Edwards, 1980, p. 219; Harrison, 2000, p. 35), and “cording off” by Smith (2007, p. 145). Both these terms have similar meanings and refer to the systematic pursuit of tracking African-Americans into a White dominated business (intercollegiate athletics) to the detriment of the majority of individual African Americans as well as the greater population. The sports industry is owned and controlled almost exclusively by older White males, there is nowhere in the Black community where athleticism is of economic value. Thus, African Americans are forced to go and work within the White dominated colleges or professional leagues (Hawkins, 1999). This has prompted many African-American families to encourage unrealistic expectations as they look to sports as being a potential economic savior. Former high-profile professional basketball player Charles Barkley made the following comment (McCallum, 2002), “Sports are a detriment to Blacks, not a positive. You have a society now where every Black kid in the country thinks the only way he can be successful is through athletics. People look at athletes and entertainers as the sum total of Black America. This is a terrible, terrible thing, because that ain’t even one tenth of what we are” (p. 35). The research backs up Barkley’s views. Edwards (1993) reported that the current situation is little more than academic victimization and

athletic exploitation by everyone concerned, from the NCAA administration through college presidents down to the students who attend the contests. Dowling (2000b) describes how college coaches believe they are helping African American student-athletes by bending admissions rules and giving them illegal assistance. The reality is that this benefits no one and is actually a disservice.

The notion that African American student athletes are little more than unpaid prostitutes performing for the rich is the subject of several studies. This may seem extreme at first, yet closer examination may serve to validate the claim. Benford (2007) equates the modern day student-athlete with a latter day gladiator, while Smith (2007) compares African-American student-athletes to the indentured servants brought to the United States in the nineteenth century known as Chinese coolie laborers. Smith's study presents a nine part model in which the African-American college athletic experience is compared to the coolies. Naturally enough, every step of the process is seen as unfavorable or negative. Hawkins is the author of several studies in which he compares the predicament of African-American student-athletes to both migrant workers and slaves (1999; 2000). Hawkins (1999) reports a number of similarities between Black student-athletes and migrant workers; both enter different cultural settings in which they are disadvantaged upon entry, they are exploited for their labor, the "masters" become very wealthy off the labor of the exploited, and both communities bear the cost for the reproduction of labor. In the book, *The New Plantation: Internal Colonization of Black Student-Athletes* (2000), Hawkins outlines how today's relationship between higher education and African American student-athletes has assumed characteristics similar to slave plantations. The author introduces the "internal colonial model" (p. 69). This

model takes into account the following: a sense of being different from other students, racial isolation, a feeling of lacking control over one's life, racial discrimination, and remoteness from other students. The model places the experiences of African American student-athletes into a greater theoretical framework and concludes that the experiences of African American student-athletes have significant similarities to those of colonized peoples. Hawkins expounds on how the lives of student-athletes are exploitable; student-athletes are controlled with limited freedoms, and college athletics is a billion dollar industry. The elevated concentration of African Americans within the high profile collegiate sports of football and basketball brings with it more challenges. Watt & Moore (2001) report that the extra pressure within these two sports in itself often leads to poorer academic performance. For most student-athletes, the most important and influential person during their college years is their coach or coaches. The next section will examine the literature pertaining to the roles of intercollegiate coaches.

Sports Coaches in Intercollegiate Athletics

Despite the prominent role sports coaches' play in the lives of student-athletes, the majority of scholarly research into this group focuses on various coaching instructional methods and how coaches achieve success in competition not on the development they may exert away from competition or practice. As such, a field of study known as coaching science has begun to emerge (Potrac, Jones, & Armour, 2002) employing terms such as 'athlete-centered', 'humanistic', 'holistic growth', and 'development'. Some go even further, connecting the art of coaching to broader psychological terms such as Maslow's theory of self-actualization (Kidman, McKenzie, & McKenzie, 1999). Potrac et al. (2002) report on coaches operating as social beings within a social environment.

Although these terms were first used in relation to coaching instruction skills, they are, if applied to interactions that occur off the field of play, germane to this study as well. The following paragraphs will summarize what has been studied before in this area.

How coaches interact with student athletes and the methods they use are relevant to this study, Rhind and Jowett (2010) state that coach/athlete relationships are the most important and significant when it comes to developing players. Potrac, Jones, and Cushion (2007) used The Arizona State Observation Instrument to show that coaches achieve more with positive reinforcement than by negativity in their interactions. In their study into how coaches should go about building a successful college athletic program, Vallee and Bloom (2005) emphasize the effectiveness of an environment that fosters development, over and against one that is simply authoritarian. Sperber (2000) relates how coaches actually work *against* the mission of the university, in terms of their remuneration and, more pointedly in their unreasonable demands on the student-athletes. The coaching profession tends to have a lot of transition and turnover within their ranks, especially at the assistant level. This can lead to situations where coaches are less vested in the institution and more prone to care more about immediate athletic success than any long-term development of college students. Obviously, this relates to all student-athletes but for some students of color trying to navigate the transition to college, a stern approach from coaches is often negative and harmful.

Within the literature relating to racism or abuses against African-American student-athletes, coaching behavioral excess is a recurrent issue. Many studies indicate that young Black men feel that they would be better motivated with a softer approach. Feinstein (2009) dedicates an entire chapter to coaching abuses toward players; his report

centers on Bob Knight, the retired Indiana and Texas Tech basketball coach. In this chapter, the author relates various instances where coaching in a threatening manner had negative consequences for the students. James (2005) reports that for many students of color, much of their success can be attributed to a strong relationship with their high school coach, a relationship based more on nurturing and development. Once the student-athlete gets to college, another, less holistic relationship often replaces it, one with a coach who is often more powerful and controlling. This ‘control-freak’ coach, as illustrated by the chapter on Knight, is also a common criticism of intercollegiate athletics.

Fred Akers, who achieved great national success as the football coach at the University of Texas in the 1970s, has become a vocal critic of contemporary college football. He commented (Sperber, 2000):

The more you win the bigger the bucks, but you never win enough. I won, but I got fired for not winning more. I was out of step. Most coaches believe that the best way to win is to put their players in the most intense training possible. I never did that, I didn’t feel it was fair to the guys, I wanted them to go to class and have time to study. But I’m not in college coaching anymore (p. 28).

NCAA rules demand that student-athletes have a maximum practice load of 20 hours each week. Sperber (2000) reports on how coaches abuse this with mandatory, voluntary practices, and that this is a way coaches exert authority and control over the student-athletes by making sure they ‘live football’. Ostensibly, moving away from home, developing as a person and learning to take control of one’s life are integral parts of the college experience. Coaches can try to dominate a student-athlete for four years by forcing them to focus almost exclusively on sport. This is likened to the type of controlling methods used by the military with new recruits (Eitzen, 2009). Hawkins

(2000) reports on occasions where student-athletes fighting coaches and trying to think for themselves are punished in ways that hurts their athletic progress. Hawkins' study at one PWI reported that 50 percent of the Black student-athletes felt that they had no control over their lives, because of coaches and that they felt "frustrated and helpless" (p85). An interesting study was conducted in which ten successful coaches were asked for their perspectives on what makes a winning program. None commented on the need for control or aggressive behavior (Schroeder, 2010). The last area of coaching relative to this particular study is that of the profession's racial makeup. The student-athletes participating in this study all are African-American and the majority of coaches they report to are not.

Recent figures show that despite the fact that over 70 percent of college football players are African-American, only 8 percent of all football coaches in intercollegiate athletics are Black (Watkins, 2009). It seems very likely that some more African-Americans as coaches to be both role models and to assist young first-generation African-American men through the transition process of Division One athletics at a PWI. In addition, many college football players have little career direction. It may assist the student-athletes try harder at their academics if they saw that a meaningful career as a college coach was a stronger possibility if they graduated.

This chapter has provided an overview of the literature on college student-athletes. By providing an examination of the current state of intercollegiate athletics one can frame a context for the research to come as well as preparing one for the choice of participants and the questions to be asked. In addition, this review has provided the

reader with a better understanding of the existing literature and how much more work can be done with the student-athlete population.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This research study looked at the lived academic experiences of a group of football player student-athletes at a large research university with a good academic reputation. A great deal of interest in this population exists, but there is a real dearth of empirical research currently, as many of the previous studies have been almost exclusively quantitative in design. This qualitative study was chosen to a certain extent to address this research gap; this choice is also motivated, at least in part, by the researcher's own personality and skill sets. Beginning with the general research purpose and questions, this chapter discusses the choice of qualitative research as the focus for this study as well as a history of phenomenological research. Further discussion will include the background, role, and limitations of the researcher, the population being studied, and the data collection and analysis. Validation of the study is discussed, including checks for credibility and trustworthiness.

Research questions

In researching from a phenomenological perspective, the researcher must choose a topic that has “both social meaning and personal significance” (Moustakas, 1994). History and personal interest assist the researcher in bringing focus to the study. Given my passionate interest in this population, the phenomenon being studied, as well as my own chosen career path I was able to formulate the guiding research questions.

The primary research question is: how do you perceive and describe your experience of being an intercollegiate student-athlete who is struggling academically? In this question the key components are perceive, describe, experiences, student-athlete,

academically, and struggling. The important words in the primary question of a phenomenological study should be defined, discussed, and clarified in order to shed light on the intent and purpose of the study (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore it is necessary to explain the key words in advance of conducting the study. In this question, perceive means how participants see the phenomenon. It implies that different people see the same phenomenon differently. Describe refers to the words used to communicate the action carried out. Experiences are the conscious reflections of the phenomenon, i.e.- what does it mean to the participants? Student-athletes are the football players chosen for the study. They are all currently enrolled students who are on the team. Academically refers to the scholarly or student component of being a student athlete, and struggling means the result of various grades and reports from instructors that show ineffectual performance in course work.

The following questions will also guide the design and execution of this study:

1. Share with me your experiences as a student and an athlete before coming to this university.
 - A. How would you describe the attention and support you received for academic success in school?
 - B. How would you describe the attention and support you received for accomplishments in athletics?
2. What is it like to be you, a student and an athlete at this university?
 - A. Describe a “normal” day for you at this university.
3. Tell me something about how members of your team treat academics?
4. Tell me something about how you treat academics?

5. Talk about the times where you engaged in behaviors that helped you earn better grades.
6. Talk about the times where you engaged in behaviors that you knew would hurt your grades.
7. Are the members of the coaching staff supportive of your academics? If so, how so?
8. Are members of the coaching staff unsupportive of your academics? If so, how so?

Why Qualitative Research?

Creswell (1998) states, “Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem” (p. 4). Therefore, the purpose of qualitative research is to explore the experiences and perceptions of participants being researched within the context of their lived experience (Borland, 2001).

Qualitative studies tend to provide detailed, rich descriptions of lived experiences that are presumably more insightful than quantitative studies, those involving statistical analyses (Denzil & Lincoln, 2000; Kuh & Andreas, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, Kuh, Schu, Whitt, Andreas, Lyons & Strange (1991) posit that qualitative studies are appropriate and particularly helpful for student affairs researchers who are trying to understand the quality of student experience. This approach has led to a considerable change in the way research is conducted in the field of student affairs. There is now a significant percentage of studies which are qualitative in design (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). Arminio and Hultgren expand further on the need for qualitative

research to assist practitioners in the modern college environment, where the voices of individuals may not be heard.

Taylor and Bogdan (1984) make the following claims as to why qualitative research is particularly suitable for researchers in education. 1) It is inductive and holistic. 2) It is sensitive to researcher effects. 3) It draws on ‘natural settings’ as the source of data. 4) It is concerned with the subject’s point of view. 5) It is descriptive and reports on all perspectives available to it. 6) It is humanistic and is interested in a person’s ‘inner life’ 7) It emphasizes validity. Qualitative research allows a look into the “unpredictabilities, idiosyncrasies and quirkiness built into the experiential ‘life-world’ of human beings” (Freebody, 2003). These insights render qualitative research an appropriate method for this particular study, which probes the classroom experiences of a group of student-athletes who are at risk academically.

There is a dearth of qualitative research into the area of student-athletes who are struggling academically and it is the goal of this study to address this gap. In addition, only qualitative methods, particularly phenomenological research, can fully render an understanding of why students behave as they do. This study will give a voice to those student-athletes who are choosing to miss class, behaving poorly in the classroom, or comporting themselves in other counterproductive ways. Qualitative inquiry into how these students construct the meaning of their maladaptive academic behavior provides others with a new set of insights into their reasoning. This can hopefully enable people in the field to engage the problem more effectively, and for other researchers to investigate further.

Methodological Approach: Phenomenology

The phenomenological approach in qualitative research will be used in the design and execution of this study. Understanding the person from his own point of view, in light of his own experience, is the most real way of knowing him (Moustakas, 1956). Moustakas (1994), claims that one must reflect first on the meaning of the experience for oneself, and then turn outward to those being studied. Phenomenology is less of a quest for knowledge than it is a quest for understanding, “to grasp, to hear, get, catch, or comprehend the meaning of something” (Schwandt, 1999).

Patton (1990) argues that researchers in phenomenological research studies have to capture how a person experiences a phenomenon, how he/she feels about it, perceives it, judges it, makes sense of it, and talks about it with others. On the other hand, Giorgi (1985) considers the word “describe” to be the operative one in phenomenological research (p.141). Giorgi also states that the aim of the researcher is to describe, as accurately as possible, the phenomenon, refraining from any prior framework and staying true to the facts. This study incorporated both of these perspectives.

A researcher’s epistemology is literally one’s theory of knowledge (Creswell, 1998) a set of perspectives that decides how the phenomenon will be studied. My epistemological position regarding this study can be described as follows: knowledge of personal experiences exist in the members of a group, in this instance a group of student-athletes who are at-risk academically. These students would appear to choose to behave in negative ways, and such knowledge is social and can be transmitted to others. As a result of this, a phenomenological method has been identified as being the most appropriate for this study.

Phenomenology came out of Europe in the early twentieth century and can be seen as a reaction to what Eagleton (1983) calls "...a sterile positivism, a myopic obsession with the categorizing of facts" (p.54). The German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) "sought to develop a new philosophical method which would lend absolute certainty to a disintegrating civilization" (Groenewald, 2004, p.3).

Phenomenology has origins in the philosophers Kant and Hegel but, according to Vandenburg, (1997), Husserl is the "fountainhead of phenomenology in the twentieth century" (p.11). Husserl developed the concept of *epoche*, where "one looks inside to become aware of personal bias and to eliminate personal involvement with the subject material" (Patton, 1990 p.407). This means the researcher must examine the evidence critically, to determine whether that perceived experience truly exists. However, critical personal reflection is almost impossible; *the epoche* is a suspension of personal judgment to achieve an understanding of the experience of another. In research, this requires the researcher to detach from assumptions and accept the perceptions of another as evidence. The focal point of the study is to depict what the participants have experienced, how they experienced it, and the meanings they make of their lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). This particular study aimed to elucidate the perceptions of the individuals who were experiencing a particular phenomenon, one of being academically at-risk student-athletes at a large Division I research university. These are also student athletes who are struggling to make sense of the transition to college and whose behaviors may seem strange to outsiders.

Site and population

This study was conducted at a large research university in the Midwest. This particular institution is moderately competitive in terms of admission and its standards are increasing each year. The university enrolls just over thirty thousand undergraduates, the majority of whom are in-state residents and of White ethnicity. Efforts are currently underway to increase minority enrollment, but at the present time African-Americans comprise less than five percent of the overall student body. The vast majority of African-American undergraduates at this university are female. Athletically, it is classified as a Division I school and it annually competes for championships, both in its major conference and nationally. The athletic teams recruit nationally, and the football team is about a 50-50 split between in-state and out-of-state students. Over half of the team is African-American.

To access this population I needed to receive permission from the university human subjects division (See Appendix B), the athletic department at the institution, the coaching staff and the individual student-athletes. This was all granted in a straightforward manner. An informed consent agreement was developed (see Appendix B) gaining permission that included the following areas:

- That they are participating in research
- The purpose of the research
- The procedures of the research
- The perceived risk and/or benefits of the research
- The voluntary nature of participation
- The participants right to stop at any time
- The right to confidentiality

The informed consent form was explained to each student-athlete prior to the interviews and then signed in the presence of the participant, who was given a copy. Each student signed this without paying a great deal of attention to it, a fact I related to student-athletes signing away many privacy and confidentiality rights.

Data Collection Procedures

Study tables are common in intercollegiate athletics. These tables are group settings where students study in an assigned space, often under supervision of coaches or academic support staff for a designated number of hours each week. At this institution, a group of about thirty football student-athletes, comprised of freshmen and poorly performing upperclassmen, are mandated to attend study tables. This proviso and their regular meeting times at the study tables made this an ideal group from which to select participants. I spent many evenings observing the students for a total of about twenty hours. After several weeks I felt that I had gained some trust and confidence within the group and I began to recruit my participants. I talked with individuals over several nights of study table and began to envision the type of student I wanted to interview. I did not include freshmen as possible participants, as I wanted students who had made the transition and already had some college experiences. I made appointments by email or telephone to meet with a small number of student-athletes, some of whom did not show. Others declined to take part in the study. Eventually, I had a sample of six football players, all of whom were African-American scholarship athletes. There were five sophomores and one junior; all were in some form of academic jeopardy. More complete biographical information is provided in Chapter 4 regarding the participants.

Each of the subjects was asked to participate in a face-to-face interview of about two hours in length during the Spring 2010 semester. In addition, there was one planned follow up interview with each participant by telephone, although this proved problematic when some participants did not take part. I was able to follow up with two of the six subjects I initially interviewed, and one of these cut me off abruptly when he had another call. It was never made clear to me why I could not get the others, who had all spoken to me willingly and frankly, to respond to my follow-up calls. I have never been able to ascertain the reasons for this, students who agreed to be interviewed and opened up later chose not to reply to me.

A semi-structured approach was used in order to glean information from the participants regarding the phenomenon being studied. This allowed the interview to be as conversational and exploratory as possible and allowed the participants a certain level of comfort and freedom to go on tangents as they shared their stories. Although I only met with the football players once, I felt they were all very forthcoming and that I had their trust. I attribute that to a combination of my counseling background and the time I spent in their study environment with them. Phenomenological researchers do not see the participants as objects. Rather, they see them as fellow human beings. This relationship renders it more likely to lead to deeper, more meaningful and expressive responses from the interviewees.

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative researchers are actively involved in all phases of the research process. This includes the formulation of research questions, participant selection, and the

organization and interpretation of data (Jones, 2002). It is vital that the investigator constantly reflect and make reliable decisions regarding the components of the study. Tierney and Lincoln (1997) state that researchers in qualitative research have to be constantly innovative and attempt to find new, creative ways to “tell the story” (p.180), and that all qualitative research begins with self. Lincoln & Guba (1985) summarize that qualitative researchers in essence become the data collecting instrument. Arminio and Hultgren (2002) report on the need for qualitative researchers to reflect often on their relationships with their respondents, and that the researcher has to be aware that very personal and sometimes painful information may be revealed along the way, particularly when researching sensitive topics. Despite the phenomenological tradition of bracketing the researcher’s opinions, it is always likely that researcher biases will emerge. It is therefore appropriate that I include a short personal history in order to be as transparent as possible.

My training in counseling turned out to be very helpful with the interviewing process. One of the most important parts of my master’s program was how to conduct interviews and we often met with people undergoing considerable trauma. Therefore, areas such as listening skills, empathy, paraphrasing and summarizing all become an integral part of the interviews with the student-athletes. I view note taking as a barrier during an interview so I did not take any notes during the meetings themselves. I did, however, make notes immediately after the interviews, noting my own feelings and any anomalies that may have occurred. This would have included facial expressions, body language and suspected instances of dishonesty. I tape recorded each interview in its entirety. Audio recordings enabled me to transcribe the interviews for accuracy and to

listen to verbal intonations and cues, all factors which may turn out to be important. It also assists in accuracy. I think it is important that the interview be transcribed in its entirety. As themes emerged later in the process, having a full transcription available to review was essential. In qualitative studies, the researcher tends to evolve the questions as participants provide input. As true to the phenomenological tradition as possible, I made a concentrated effort not to let this happen and I believe that I was successful. The questions remained the same for the entirety of the study.

Background of the Researcher

I am neither a former college student-athlete nor have I been an at-risk college or university student. I did however play soccer at an advanced level in high school in Great Britain. Upon leaving high school, I did not enter college for many years as I knew I would be setting myself up for failure, mainly due to lack of interest. I entered community college in my late twenties and caught the education bug. I continued to attain an associate's degree and a bachelor of the arts all the way through a master's degree in psychological counseling and doctoral studies in higher education.

As a graduate assistant, I taught classes and advised academically at-risk students, both in summer bridge programs for incoming freshmen and throughout the academic year. For two years I worked primarily with students whose grades caused them to be placed on academic probation. There were a considerable number of student-athletes enrolled in my classes, although in each class they were always in the minority. As a non-traditional student who had taken out sizable financial aid loans to subsidize my education, I admit to biases regarding the way many younger students today often show a

sense of entitlement and a lack of interest in education. With this population of football players, a full academic scholarship often makes the student-athlete feel they are somewhat special and more important than other students as well as other student-athletes. Resentment towards these students exists among students from every campus subgroup and I felt a need to address my own feelings repeatedly during the study to enable the interviews to be conducted without prejudice and to avoid the possibility of tainted data interpretation.

I was born in America but was raised in Scotland, where the educational system is vastly different than the American model; students excelling at sports had no motivation to maintain grades or standards for eligibility reasons. As such, the culture of high school sports was quite explicitly anti-academics. As stated previously, I was a very good soccer player with reasonable aspirations of a professional career, but ultimately I was not good enough to make a living playing soccer. I believe that the lack of competitive intercollegiate sports in Scotland contributed to my own lack of educational motivation. Perhaps if I had had an opportunity to compete at the collegiate level, I might have tried harder in high school. My subsequent academic performance assures me that I was always intellectually capable. Upon my arrival in America, I quickly grasped the size and significance of intercollegiate athletics and chose to focus much of my doctoral coursework on this very subject. I also taught an undergraduate class in college athletics and remain convinced that despite the many shortcomings, intercollegiate athletics has a vital role in American higher education.

I worked through my doctoral degree in an academic unit called the Student Academic Center (SAC) at a major research university. The SAC's mission is to provide

a range of support services to undergraduates and many graduate students are involved in employment there. In my role there, I was employed teaching classes and giving workshops and counseling to academically at-risk undergraduate students. It was at this stage of my academic career that I began to take interest in why students fail in college. I paid particular attention to the terrible choices they made regarding their academics. Given the interest in my doctoral work with student-athletes, I was always interested in any who came to my workshops or were enrolled in my classes.

In 2004 I was employed by a Department of Intercollegiate Athletics at a large research university as a Learning Specialist. During summer orientation, incoming student-athletes are screened to detect possible academic shortcomings or learning disabilities. I have worked closely with a number of them to assist them through the transition to college and beyond, working as a liaison with campus probation programs and the office of disability services. We track students closely and recurring themes are those of bad academic behavior: chronic class absences, sleeping in class, no note taking, failure to pay attention in class and failure to hand in assignments on time or at all. Most of the literature on at-risk students assures us that these behaviors have a strong negative impact on the students' academic performances, so the students are warned against them continuously by coaches and academic staff. When counseled, the student-athletes themselves often admit they know they should not be engaging in these behaviors. I am fascinated by the ambiguity here and interested in trying to understand the meaning behind these continually bad academic decisions. I am part of a team of three learning specialists and do not work with the sport of football or their student-athletes. Since

much of the literature involves football, I am up to date on developments in the field relating to this team.

Many at risk student-athletes at larger research universities in sports such as football and men's basketball see college as being a 'springboard' for them to play professional sports. I hope this study will assist young student-athletes to see the value of a college education or realize how behaviors they display can be altered so that they might earn a college degree. Very few college athletes are chosen to play at the next level and the importance of a college degree in today's society cannot be emphasized enough. Too many 'failed' student-athletes return to impoverished neighborhoods with limited professional skills to offer employers. It is hoped that this study will be useful to help reverse this trend.

Data Analysis and Presentation

Data analysis and presentation in qualitative research can take many forms. In this study, the interviews were transcribed exactly, so as to provide verbatim information. Each transcript was read at least twice before further analysis was completed, a process that is required in qualitative research (Hatch, 2002).

Patton (2002) states that phenomenological analysis seeks to make clear the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people. Similarly according to Creswell (1998), phenomenological data analysis occurs through information reduction, analysis of relevant statements, identification of common themes, and a search for all possible meanings emerging from the data.

It is important to re-emphasize the importance of the role of the researcher here and provide the detailed information crucial to phenomenological studies that Creswell describes in the first point above. Phenomenological studies demand the self-examination process referred to earlier as *epoche*. This allows the researcher to remove, or at least become aware of prejudices, viewpoints or assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2002). A technique used is that of bracketing. In this analytical process, the researcher “brackets out” the world and in this study, that will mean examining the transcript word for word as if the researcher, in this case me, has no prior knowledge of the phenomenon being studied. All of this is necessary prior to the actual data being analyzed. As the investigator in this study, I critically examined myself before analyzing the data to remove, or at least be aware of my own prejudices, viewpoints, or assumptions. As an older white male working in the athletic department there was always a likelihood that I would be seen as an authority figure. I would like to think that I was able to overcome this successfully, but recognize that critical self-reflection may make this claim unfeasible.

Validation

This study used Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) premise that a good qualitative study will persuade readers that the study is important in four areas: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. According to Lincoln and Guba these are the naturalistic equivalents of the conventional terms of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (1985). Good qualitative studies are considered trustworthy and accurate and should include all four of the above mentioned spheres.

Credibility addresses the significance of the researcher. It gives assurances of the match between respondents' take on their situation and the researcher's representation of same (Schwandt, 2001). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend that credibility is obtained by triangulation of data through the use of different research source, methods, investigators, and theories; prolonged engagement in the field; peer debriefings; and member checks where data and conclusions are tested with stakeholders. This study, although the result of a relatively brief time in the field, involved many hours spent in the environment, so the researcher could become thoroughly acquainted with it. Member checking was attempted, but only one student did go over and make comments on their story. The others declined to look. Peer debriefing took place with three of my colleagues from graduate school, who had conducted their own doctoral dissertations or graduate work using qualitative research.

Transferability is very different from generalizability, which is thought to be its quantitative counterpart. Traditional researcher's look to make relatively precise statements from their quantitative data about external validity. The naturalist, on the other hand, sets out a working hypothesis with a description of the context in which it was found to hold (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability provides the audience with sufficient information to draw similarities between the circumstances studied and other cases to which the findings may be transferred. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that, "It's not the inquirers task to provide an index of transferability but to offer the data base that allow transferable judgments possible on the part of the potential appliers" (p.39). This study should be able to provide a basis for researchers to study similar groups of student-athletes at peer institutions.

The final two measures presented by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are dependability and confirmability. They typically require the involvement of external auditors, the participants being studied, or individuals from other stakeholding groups. Auditing is described as a procedure most useful for establishing dependability. Member checks and peer debriefing are considered helpful in establishing credibility and confirmability. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) these four measures are all essential in interpretation and analyzing qualitative data. In this study, I used a group of three peers from my graduate program as well as two athletic department colleagues to assist me as the study progressed.

Verification of interpretation

The value of qualitative research turns on the researcher's ability to keep the data, the interpretations, the reductions, and the resulting conclusions closely linked to the reality from whence they came. To this end, this study will use the previously stated foundation from Lincoln and Guba (1985) of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is often described as 'truth value' (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and in this study was obtained through peer debriefings, member checks, and returning to the participants for follow up. Transferability will depend somewhat on the participants, but the findings may have similarities nationally, particular among analogous groups—at risk student athletes at major research universities. Dependability refers to consistency in this study and will be examined as part of the peer debriefing and member checks. Confirmability can also be described as neutrality, and for the purposes of this research the *epoche* and bracketing will be important components of ensuring this occurs. "Validity" and "reliability" are notions of quantitative research; therefore, this

qualitative study will be more concerned with truthful analysis, interpretations and conclusions.

CHAPTER 4: SAMPLE

Participant Access and Identification

The participants in this study were six undergraduate male football players attending a large Midwestern research institution. The university is located in a small urban community, one mostly identified as being a college town, and the nearest metropolitan center is about an hour's drive away. The institution is considered to be somewhat competitive regarding admission. Much of the literature pertains to issues within the subgroup of African-American student-athletes so when I received favorable responses from this group in my recruitment phase I decided to interview only African-American students. I made sure that they had all completed at least one full academic year on campus as I felt they needed at least this much experience to describe their campus experiences in a meaningful way. I did not believe that interviewing freshmen would have provided enough rich detail about the college experience. The decision to interview only football players was an attempt to find some consistency within the sample; it also resulted from my knowledge of college football's high level of appeal and visibility. At this particular institution, football study hall is held apart from other student-athletes and access was easy. This made my access to the football players much more convenient and was therefore an important consideration.

There are two groups on the football team for whom regular study hall attendance was mandatory—all freshman and any other players who were struggling academically. By attending football study hall and talking with the sophomores and upper classmen, I was able to identify six individuals who could give me rich information about their academic experiences. I ended up selecting five sophomores and one junior. On any

given evening, there are sometimes as many as 25-30 students in football study hall, not including an assortment of advisors and tutors. I was able to assimilate myself here by consistently attending study hall and trying to blend in; gradually, I negotiated talking with the students until I had my participants.

I asked the interested students to provide me their email addresses. They then received a cover letter via campus email (See Appendix A) and were asked to provide basic demographic and academic information. No incentives cash or otherwise, were offered to any of the research subjects to compensate them for their participation. Each of the students was contacted via email or text messaging to set up initial interviews. All one-on-one meetings took place outside of the study hall environment, where anonymity was assured. I had been communicating openly with the majority of study hall attendees, so my participants remained inconspicuous when they talked with me.

Individual interviews

I interviewed each subject for a duration of between sixty to ninety minutes with follow-up telephone interviews with two of the six clearing up any ambiguity generated during the original session. Each of the in-person interviews was audio taped and notes were taken throughout including comments regarding body language or voice inflection. Telephone interviews were not recorded but notes were taken. After the data was collected, I completed transcriptions of the tape-recorded interviews. These transcriptions were executed as accurately as possible. After reviewing both the audiotapes and the transcripts, several of the students were contacted by email for additional follow up mostly to clear up remaining haziness but none of them chose to

respond. A study information sheet (see Appendix B) explaining the procedure was handed to each student prior to the interview. All of the student-athletes were assured that their identities would be protected. Toward this end, I minimized recording identifiable personal information during the interview and review process. The audiotapes were destroyed promptly after the transcriptions were completed.

This study sought to learn more about the academic experience in college of football student-athletes. Therefore, open-ended questions were the most appropriate to elicit their descriptions of their lived experiences. The initial trust that formed between the students and me was founded upon the time I spent fitting into the study hall setting. At the initial interview I used my counselor training to help the student-athletes feel at ease. Using a semi-structured interview approach which allowed the dialogue to be unrestrictive, conversational, and exploratory (see Appendix C), I began by asking each student-athlete about his experiences on campus. I planned to build upon their responses in order to construct rich descriptions and solidify my own understanding of these students' academic experiences.

Institutional Setting

This study was conducted using a small sample of student-athletes on the varsity football team at a large research university in the Midwest. This institution has approximately 40,000 students of which over 29,000 are undergraduates. The setting is considered rural and is located in a small city of around 80,000 inhabitants. Much of the population of the surrounding district depends on the institution for employment and financial success. The university is the flagship campus in the statewide university

system and is located about one hour south of the state capitol. This city happens to be the largest city in the state and is home to an international airport and large metropolitan business centers.

The university is home to many award winning faculty members and highly ranked academic programs. One of the criticisms of the institution leveled by the student body is the proliferation of graduate students teaching entry level courses to undergraduates. The campus is perceived by many to be a liberal one, while within the athletic department, like many across the nation, more conservative values are prominent. The institution is predominately made up of White students who have just left high school. There are many initiatives to try to increase the enrollment of minority populations, particularly within the subgroup of African-American men. One place where diversity is found is on the roster of the football team, which is populated by a large number of African-American players.

This university's varsity sports compete at the highest levels with over twenty sports and close to seven hundred student athletes. The institution has a history of national success in many sports and counts recent national championships and Olympians amongst its honors. The football team has not experienced success historically and recent efforts have been made to change this. Anecdotally, there is strong criticism from fans, boosters, and alumni that, unlike many successful football programs, this institution has been overly rigid on admitting football players. Meanwhile, the admissions office continues to raise the standards for admission in terms of standardized test scores and academic performance.

Student Participants

Six students participated in this study: Patrick, James, Justin, Richard, Andrew, and Blake. The voices of the student-athletes in this study were of great significance. Without them, this dissertation would not exist. Their willingness to participate and open up part of their lives to me was instrumental in the process of enabling me to share their stories and perceptions. The following student profile summaries provide a context for understanding the descriptions and experiences of these student-athletes. The names used in these profiles-- and throughout the dissertation-- are pseudonyms. Similarly, home town information has been summarized so that the student-athlete's anonymity is further protected. I have omitted details about the players' positions for similar reasons. The hierarchy within football means that each player reports to a position coach under the overall guidance of the head coach. It will later become apparent how important a role this can be in the student-athlete's overall development. All these players play different positions and report to different coaches.

Five of the six students were not considered strong enough to be direct admits to this university and an institutional faculty sponsorship program was needed to get them admitted. The university has a program where students who come up short in the admissions process can be sponsored by a faculty member. This faculty member then mentors them through the first semester and sometimes the relationship is extended informally for as long as both parties want. With the exception of Patrick who has played in every game, all 'redshirted' their freshmen year. Redshirting is a term unique to college sports, and refers to a student-athlete having four years of playing eligibility. If a student athlete takes a year off for any reason at all and extends their academic

calendar to five years, the practice is known as redshirting. Most football players sit out their first year to improve their strength and conditioning as high school does not have them prepared physically for the rigors of their sport. All of the students expressed some interest in playing professionally after their college career was over. They maintained this desire despite the lack of ‘starring’ time on the playing field. They all expected to improve enough on the field to forge a reasonable chance of making it to the next level. None demonstrated any real confidence regarding realistic careers. Although all mentioned involvement in romantic relationships of differing intensity, they all identified as being single with no dependents.

Throughout this section, the actual lived experiences of the student-athletes are revealed through the verbatim responses that describe them. These quotations give voice to the participants and provide a rich and meaningful examination of what it is like to be an African-American Division 1 football player at a large research university. In the following chapter, the themes which these quotes begin to reveal will be dealt with in more detail. The students will be presented in the following order: Patrick, James, Justin, Richard, Andrew, and Blake. This was the order in which I interviewed them.

Patrick

Patrick is a 20 year old sophomore who is an out of state student at this institution. He is tall with an athletic appearance and likes to wear cut off tops that show off his muscles. Although he is not one of those over-sized football players that stand out physically, he has a fit, athletic appearance and with his apparel he fits the mold of a football player. Patrick lives off-campus in an apartment with others on the football

team, has an engaging, outgoing personality and makes friends easily. Within the larger group at study hall, his voice was often the loudest, and it was apparent that he was one of the most well- liked and respected among his peers. For the staff charged with maintaining a suitable environment within study hall, he could often be a disruptive element. Yet his endearing personality meant that he easily talked his way out of any trouble. His overall persona could be described as that of a likeable rogue.

Patrick grew up in a large city marked by economic hardship. “My Moms and Pops work really hard but we got nothing, you know what I’m saying.” He described how his family lived in a poor neighborhood within an inner-city; one considered by many to be one of America’s most challenged. Despite the run-down nature of his old neighborhood he talked about it with some affection:

It’s nothing like here. There’s people everywhere, people walk a lot, hang out on steps, corners. Even in winter. The houses aren’t as nice but you know its home. You go to the store for your moms and people know you. Friendly. It’s poor though, I mean we did better than most but you just know that’s peeps be struggling to get by.

Patrick’s descriptions of the demographics of the neighborhood suggest that it is predominately African-American with a growing number of Latinos. Patrick shared that while there were some White people living or working in the area they were very much in the minority. “That’s one big difference between here and there; there you got almost no White folks.” This was particularly true in the public schools that Patrick attended where there were almost no White students.

In Patrick’s high school experience, there was precious little in the way of academic expectations for the students. “The teachers were just happy if you behaved. There be some serious clowning [by the students] in those classes.” His high school

performance did not meet the admission standards at the institution, so he needed to be sponsored to obtain admission.

Sometimes I feel that it was like they didn't want you to be smart enough for college. Like, I was told for years that I'd get to college for football but they never tried to get me with the college smarts. I don't remember a teacher ever like, helping me with stuff so that I'd get it. They just seemed happy that we didn't act up. I was just bored. Quiet. I never said much

Patrick is the second youngest of five children and is the only one in his family who has expressed any aspirations to leave the old neighborhood. Although he did not seem particularly close to any of his siblings, it was clear that Patrick did take pride in the family unit. He spoke about his parents and siblings in concerned tones. "I worry about them, I'm down here and they kind of need me." In some sense, it appears that Patrick may be the family's meal ticket out of their present plight. "I hope I make it in the pros just for them. Buy them a big house somewhere nice." The professional aspiration seems possible for Patrick, as he has already contributed on the playing field in his short intercollegiate career.

As previously stated, most intercollegiate football players sit out their freshman year as redshirts. There are a number of reasons that a player does not redshirt. For Patrick, who did not redshirt and has had significant playing time both years, it seems that his playing time was based on merit. He is the most skilled player available in his position. The consequence of this is that Patrick, with a naturally gregarious personality, seems to revel in the attention he is receiving. He is aware of his good fortune. "I know I wasn't meant to play freshman year but I can't imagine how it would be to sit out a year. I would die." He further explained:

Freshman year I was one of the few [freshmen] that got to play and it just made everything so much better. Practice was better, I was more into lifting, just everything. Some of the fellows who didn't play would get real down on themselves and I was so thankful.

One area where Patrick did not excel was in the classroom. He has struggled academically with the transition to college and has come close to dismissal. Currently, he is on academic probation. Surprisingly, this perilous predicament does not seem to cause him any consternation or stress:

School has been tough, I will be the first to admit it, it's not high school. I can get there though; you just need to get out the bad habits. I know I will make it. It is not an issue at all. If I try I can pass the classes, I've just done stupid shit a lot of the time which has been tough to make up. Once I put effort in it will be easy.

Patrick has yet to declare a major or show any interest in a field of study. "School is just something I am doing so I can play football," he stated. He thinks he will end up either with a HPER (School of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation) or General Studies major and admits that he does not care much about what his degree is in. "The advisors talk to you about majors and I know I got to have one soon but I'm not tripping on it." Part of Patrick's issue could be his lack of focus regarding his post-college career plans. He was aware that college would afford him better opportunities than his parents or peers faced, but he did not have any real aspirations outside of football. He remarked, "I want to play pro ball. That's it, NFL, Canada, or even arena. After that shit will work itself out." This remark shows that Patrick had no articulated back-up plan should his professional dream not come to fruition.

Patrick's popularity on the football team has transferred to other, more social relationships on campus. He has enjoyed the interactions with young women he has met at parties, especially from his year living in the residence halls. "It's wild, the girls go

nuts, running down the halls and stuff, I liked that.” He did admit that for all the fun he had meeting girls at night, he was unable to connect to people in the classroom. Patrick stated, “I maybe clown with them a bit, but I don’t really talk about things like homework.” He reported no occasions where he chose to meet with non-athletes in study groups or take part in any class assignments with others.

For Patrick, college is one big adventure where academics are a meddlesome aside to the real reason for college: playing football. He perceives anyone within the institution to be unimportant unless they can assist him in becoming a better football player. He does understand that rules exist and that he has to hang around as an eligible student for as long as is compulsory, but academics will always be a necessary evil for him.

I found Patrick to be the most likeable of all the participants in the study. His infectious optimism and willingness to open up during the interviews made him a delight to be around. In study hall, some students seemed more popular than others and although no one was actually ostracized, there were some who were rather isolated from the general crowd. Patrick often went out of his way to include everyone and used humor and kindness to accomplish this.

James

James is a 19 year old sophomore who hails from the large city located about 50 miles from campus. Despite this proximity, he had never visited the campus or its surrounding area until a recruiting visit for football. “Where I’m from you don’t know anything about colleges except watching sports” he stated. James grew up in an inner-

city environment challenged by considerable poverty induced hardships. He has a complex relationship with the area in which he grew up:

I hate it up there; it's not safe, lots of drama, brothers getting shot. It's home though. You know what I am saying, I still have most of my friends from there, fellas I grew up with, went through high school with.

James, the product of a single parent home, grew up in an apartment with his mother and young sister. "I never really knew my dad, he left when I was young." The lack of money in the household affected James, "We would get cold in winter, I mean real cold, you thought you would freeze." James's family has lived in that part of town for generations, and he feels a strong kinship with his extended family, who all live within a few square miles of each other. "Even in the city none of us really travelled outside the neighborhood, until I went to play football anyways." Although he did not grow up with a lot of friends, he feels very close to the few he did make at that time, stating "they are the peeps I count on, more than anyone else."

James is a first generation college student who grew up and attended high school in the inner city at a high school considered academically challenged. His situation was rather similar to Patrick's, in that the classroom environment was not always focused on learning. He commented, "The teachers didn't care, a lot of the time it was subs, just there to keep you quiet." His high school years were spent concentrating on football. James stated, "Football was what kept me safe, out of trouble. Without it I'd be in jail. Or dead." His memories of growing up all relate to football and his success:

I never really liked anything until I started getting good at football back in middle school. I got all this attention, the coach would tell me all the great things I was doing. I'd never been good at anything, my moms, she loves me but never really told me I was good at stuff. Football changed all that.

James received many college recruiting overtures and went on many visit but his inattention to academics caught up with him and he was denied admission by several prestigious institutions. At this institution, he was only admitted after being sponsored by a faculty member. His lack of academic preparation for college did not worry him unduly, “I did what I needed to do, I could never have cared about grades growing up.” James appeared to realize that his best shot at improving his future was to work on the athletic component of his life.

Although James was in superb physical shape, he was the smallest member of the group I interviewed and looked the least like a football player. He did not have the same imposing physical façade as the rest of the group. He remarked on this, “I don’t need to be big in my position, it’s all about speed and I can jump.” Like the rest, James generally wore the athletic apparel provided him by the university. “I like being seen as a football player; it’s who I am.” James was a quiet individual who always seemed to remain on the fringe of the group, sitting with his friends and never occupying the center of attention. In this respect, he was rather unusual, as the study table group was quite social with most vying to be the main attraction.

James lives off campus with a friend from high school. This friend is also a student-athlete, though not on the football team. This living arrangement works well for James, in part because it affords him some insight into the sport specific nuances that exist.

My boy Dennis and me are tight, we go way back, grade school maybe. He runs track, he fast. I mean you gots football players, like receivers, they run fast, you have to in this game. Track so much faster though. Freshman year I didn’t see him much but at lifting our teams in spring had the same schedule and we got

together more, planned rooming together soph. year. Now we room together it's tight. I can talk about all the football drama, coaches and stuff, without him really knowing who they are, you know. Easy to just have someone that's there and listens. Guys on the team. I mean they're your boys and all but, you know. You just can't share some stuff. You hang with boys on the team and you're after the same time and stuff, they don't want to hear your problem.

James redshirted and saw some limited playing time during his sophomore year, when players ahead on the depth chart were injured and he had to step in and play. Then he had a season ending knee injury during practice and his experience changed dramatically.

Sitting out for a year was hard but you knew it was coming, everyone told me to expect it. It went pretty fast, I got bigger and stronger like I needed so it wasn't as bad as getting hurt. My injury really sucked, I'd just got some time which I was ready for and it was hard but I was improving then it just went in practice. Then I had to just rehab. You have to go there every day, do all these exercises. That's the worst. It's so frustrating. I just want to get better.

James's academic experiences have left a lot to be desired. He perceived that the academic advising staff has had low expectations of him and his performance has subsequently been mediocre. He recalls:

I got here and they [academic advising staff] told me I was going to have a mentor and tutors. I could tell they were worried, they tested me for stuff, learning problems but they didn't find any. I just hadn't cared enough [about academics].

He is aware that academics are not going well, "I know they put me in the easy class, study skills and rec. and leisure and stuff." He discussed his progress, "The advisors do a good job really, they tell me it like it is. I know I need a major soon, take tougher classes." James was not pleased with his grades. Although he had never fallen below a 2.0 G.P.A., he shared that he was perilously close to academic jeopardy. Given the number of 'easy' classes he has taken so far, this is a cause for concern. James has no stated goals for his post-college life; he thinks he has an outside shot of playing

professionally if his athletic performance improves, but he did not speak much about this. There is little evidence that this is a realistic expectation.

James did not mix well with the general campus community. He spoke on several occasions about his general disdain for non-athlete students and of faculty who, “do not understand football.” As a specially admitted student, it was telling that he felt that the university should be more accommodating to him. He commented about faculty, “never even having played football probably”, as though this were the priority for higher education. He had no real experiences wherein he attempted to join in campus life or activities, or to work on academic projects with other students.

When I first began my observations at the study table, there was little to suggest that James would be a willing participant. He fit the general demographic requirements, so he was always a viable candidate, but when he showed willingness to take part I was very surprised. On the occasion of our first meeting, I found it difficult to talk with him. He would not open up and it was very difficult even eliciting responses. His responses seemed geared to appeasing me, telling me what I wanted to hear. He spouted platitudes and evaded all serious dialogue. His attitude changed abruptly once the interview started, as if something inside him decided that it was now safe to open up to me. He quickly turned into a very important, valuable contributor to the study. Although he appears quite introverted, he is much more comfortable interacting in a one-on-one situation than in the bigger group, where he was clearly uncomfortable. James put considerable thought into his responses, and I always felt that he was giving me his all with every question answered. As he discussed his relationship with Dennis, the track athlete that he roomed

with, I could tell that he was someone who benefitted considerably from talking about his issues.

James is a small man playing a very physically demanding sport where he has to be very brave and courageous to compete. He grew up in an extremely challenged neighborhood where danger lurked at all times. Having negotiated those challenges, one may expect that for him anything academia had to offer would be easy, but for James that is not the case. In James's eyes college life is one of fear and trepidation; faculty and staff wait to trip him up at every opportunity and his lack of cultural capital leaves him frustrated and bewildered. James clearly has some entitlement issues regarding the place of football within the institution. In his case, I really believe it is mere ignorance. He has no real understanding of the meaning of college. James has always seen education through the eyes of a successful football player and his academic experiences have all been negative. .

Justin

Justin is a 20 year old sophomore who is the only member of the group that did not grow up in an urban setting. Raised in a rural community in a nearby state, it was evident that Justin's roots were very important to him. One of seven siblings, Justin's parents raised him in a small house in the country. He recalled, "We had to share a lot, we didn't have much but I was always pretty happy." His family all played sports, but not at the level Justin was able to achieve. Although Justin is the third oldest child, he is the first to attend college. Justin found high school quite easy academically but admits

he wasn't pushed. "It was pretty easy, we never had much homework and you always passed." Once more, this lack of rigor in high school proved problematic.

Because of low test scores, Justin also required faculty sponsorship. He was raised in a very close-knit community and talked favorably about his high school experiences,

I liked high school. It was tight. Smaller than here, much, much smaller. You knew everyone, like all the kids really. My graduating class had maybe 150 kids, not like some that you hear about here. The teachers knew you, cared about you. Talked to your folks. That wasn't always good but I appreciate it now.

Justin discussed how high school had been very cliquey, but as a jock he was in one of the favorable cliques, "Sport, especially football, was very big where I grew up. All the athletes were tight though, hang out, parties, you know." It was clear that playing football was a definite priority in his pre-college life.

Football Fridays were great. Everyone came out for it, we won a lot but not that much but the place was packed. You really felt special. Even road games we would take tons of fans, not just students and parents. The whole community. I was like the star too. On the team. I always got the ball, got my name in the paper.

Justin had problems with the transition to college on many levels. As stated, his lack of preparation has caused him great difficulties, and he talks a lot about the size of the institution and how intimidating this was for him. The size of the classes caused him problems as well. Often, there were as many in one lecture hall as there were people in his high school graduating class. Additionally, just finding his way around campus was an issue and he found himself lost looking for buildings. He stated, "I'd be going to class and all these people were everywhere all looking like they meant business." The lack of familiarity that he experienced in his high school environment was a problem, "I didn't

want to bother anyone. I'd feel stupid asking stupid questions so didn't get directions. One class I had to drop as I missed the first few." This translated into bad academic performance in his early semesters. "First semester I got on academic probation 'cause my grades were pretty bad. I didn't see it coming but I couldn't drop as it was too late." He believes his academic performance is improving. Although he remained on academic probation, his second semester showed progress. "It was just the first semester. I got behind and was in a hole, couldn't get out. It's all good now."

Justin feels that he really let himself and his entire community back home down by his poor academic showing.

Everyone was so happy for me when I got accepted, I felt really like I was representing the whole place. Hardly anyone from my high school goes to college, couple maybe but not good schools. When I went home first Thanksgiving people would ask how I was doing and I just said I was OK, never let anyone know it wasn't good. Justin's goal is to graduate to show everyone at home that he was successful and be a role-model for others.

Unlike some of the others, Justin does have goals and plans regarding his academics. He plans to major in Recreational Sports Management within the School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation. He thinks this degree is a good fit, "there's like no real math and a ton of classes I am good at." Having redshirted he has the option of graduating in five years but is trying to finish in four and a half. He has worked out a timeline with his advisor that would enable him to graduate after his ninth semester. He has a real plan as to what he wants to do with his life:

One day I want to open up a gym back where I'm from. They really need that there, there's nothing to do and every one's out of shape. If I go pro I'd use the money to buy it. Even if I don't go pro it would be a great job.

Justin harbors dreams of playing professionally at the end of his collegiate football career. He has not played much in college but was used sparingly in his first eligible season, “In my position I knew I wouldn’t get much time early. I needs to get bigger and that means more lifting.” Justin has struck up a relationship with an ex-professional football player, Jim, now working in an administrative capacity at the institution. “He tells me what I need to do to make it [as a professional]. I think I have a shot.” Jim is also a Christian minister and Justin has enjoyed bonding with him over religious interactions. He recalled, “Growing up I was always meeting with my pastor. Jim keeps that going here, I don’t get to church as much here, he helps.”

In terms of his physique, Justin is not as imposing as some of his teammates, but he does exude athleticism and also dresses almost exclusively in the athletic apparel given to him by the university. “they give you all this free gear so you wear it. 24/7 almost. Except parties maybe.” While he was a popular member of the team at study hall and took ribbing about his rural upbringing good-naturedly, he did not socialize with non football playing students much. He stated his concerns, “I never feel that comfortable around them,” which was a good way to describe his state in this environment. Justin never seemed truly sure of himself, except when surrounded by his teammates. Coming from a small, rural community he often appeared out of his depth with the immense size of the university. He could not appear to make other campus connections easily; he made no references to regular students, he was critical of the attitudes of faculty and instructors, and he was the only sponsored athlete who did not connect with his faculty sponsor. Justin was also quite critical of the coaching staff. Ethnicity is a glaring omission from Justin’s story; despite being Black and hailing from a

region of the country where Blacks are in the minority, he did not mention race at any time. For Justin, his collegiate issues would appear to be centered much more on adjusting to the change from a small community high school to a much larger university.

Justin appears to have a good grasp of the role of college and his place within it. He is under no illusions that obtaining a degree would be very advantageous to him and is attempting to balance athletics and academics. He has a real plan to progress through college that is realistic and manageable. Justin's inability to bond with those outside his peer group is very troubling may be related to his high school experiences where he spent all of his time with other athletes. It is something that one hopes that changes for him over time. Despite Justin's constant complaints about everything from the food in the dorms to the lack of hygiene of some of his teammates, for the purposes of this study he was a delight to interview. He was punctual, tried hard to explain exactly what he meant, and genuinely seemed to care that his involvement with the study had some importance. While his dream of playing professionally remains just that, a dream, his plans for after college suit him, make a lot of sense and are quite community oriented. Communities where Justin was raised need more role models prepared to return to make them more livable places.

Richard

Richard is a 19 year old sophomore who hails from the same large out of state city as Patrick. Although Richard has no current teammates from his high school playing days, he did know several other members on the team from contests and camps growing up. Because of these connections, Richard seemed quite at home socializing with the

older members of the team and they were a source of information for him. Sometimes this was helpful, but there was a negative side as well, “my boys tell me how to make it easy, the easy classes, how to duck out of school stuff.” Richard’s main reason for college attendance is to advance his football career, but he is a serious person by nature and has a strong work ethic.

Richard stood out at study hall because of his sheer size, and although he was obviously popular, he was quite staid and businesslike. He remained aloof from the constant frivolity and appeared to attend to his studies; he was always found at the edge of the group with his laptop open and textbooks and notepads strewn around him. Unfortunately, he later admitted that at study table he tended to log into non-academic internet sites and goof off! “Procrastination and distractions like video games and Facebook kill me” he stated, highlighting a persistent problem within the study table environment. Those players at study tables who act like they are studying and working hard tend not to get the same attention from staff as those who cause disruption or clown around.

Certain positions in football require great size and students who play them are often over six and a half feet tall and weigh over 300 pounds. Richard fits this description, and as he is always found dressed in sports apparel that bears the football team name and institutional logo. In short, he looks the part of a student-athlete. Given his size, he can hardly hide in class and he is aware that he stands out, “I’m bigger and I’m Black, they know I have to be a football player.” His academic performance has been mediocre, something that clearly troubles him. He stated:

In high school I never tried that much, I mean I got it done and I got lots of A's and stuff anyway. Here it's messed up, you do your best and they give you a D or even an F. I don't know why.

Richard attended several high schools, transferring more for the reason of furthering his athletic opportunities. "Sometimes I had to get up real early but the football teams were better."

Richard had been on academic probation at the end of his second semester. With a serious personality and a tendency to get down on himself, the poor grades upset him. His first semester had been only mildly disappointing, but he followed this up with a very poor showing in the spring. "I had easier classes probably to start but I had less time. Then I had more time in spring and I just procrastinated. Got put on [academic] probation." He returned to his high school academics:

Where I'm from you don't care much about high school. As I say I did fine and never studied much. I played football or I'd probably not even have gone much. Football made you go. Lots of the fellas from home never even went or clowned when they did.

Richard is already aware that he is on track for a degree in general studies, "Everyone from home [on the team] is general studies. That's tight." The fact that many of his hometown contemporaries are pursuing the same degree makes him think it will be more manageable for him. He does talk about wanting to do well academically; he just has not shown the willingness to do what it takes to get there. "Hardly anyone graduates high school or goes to college so I really want to do it. Show them I can." Despite his self-reported easy times and good grades in high school, the university did not grant him direct admission and he had to be sponsored. He reported a favorable relationship with his faculty sponsor as well as with the few other non-football players or athletes with whom he had contact.

Richard is popular among his peers and rooms with Blake, who is also a participant in this study, as well as two other players on the team. They live in an apartment complex that houses many other football players. He described it as being a place where things sometimes become a little wild,

It can be party central where we are at, like the dorms with no RA's. You can get sleep though, cause it's all guys on the team its quiet when it has to be. And I'm kind of big [laughs], people shut up.

Richard enjoys college life; his serious nature quickly becomes an infectious laugh when he talks about his time as a student-athlete. He has a great will to succeed, which to date manifests more on the football playing side of his life:

I get down on myself, I mean I know I shouldn't really. Mostly about football, if I don't play well. Sometimes other things too, like grades though you can't always change those. Instructors just don't know sometimes how hard you work. If things are going well I'm much happier though.

To date, Richard has not played much and this has been problematic for him:

I think I should get more [playing time]. I mean the guys ahead of me are bigger maybe but I still could help. Sitting out for a year sucks, then you don't get the time you deserve.

So far, Richard's football progress is probably a bit disappointing, but his size and potential make him future promising, both in college and perhaps beyond. He is quite aware of how fortunate his size is, "Guys my size usually get drafted. If I don't get a bad injury I think someone will want me."

For someone with such a serious demeanor, Richard may be expected to have some concrete goals and plans for his post-college life. He is content to 'settle', in his words, for a general studies degree and has no idea what he wants to do other than play football professionally. There is a worry that he may become one of those statistics that

is all too common in college football, one that does not make it to the next level and fails to make the most of his opportunities.

Richard was a difficult person to read given the short interactions I had with him. He appeared to change his personality type around according to the environment. Richard was a very nice young man to talk to and I enjoyed interviewing him. In the interview setting, he was a very serious young man, one who put considerable thought into his responses to my questions. As I read the transcripts of the audio tapes and inspected them more closely, I began to detect some ambiguity with him and see him a bit differently. For all of his serious, all-business persona, when it came to many aspects of his life he often took the easy route.

Andrew

Unlike the other participants in this study, Andrew was raised in relative affluence in a prosperous suburb of the neighboring capital city. He attended a high performing high school and although he was not a great student, his grades were sufficient to gain him direct acceptance to the university. At 21, he is the oldest of the group, and is also the only junior in the study. He is a very large young man, both tall and heavy, although he maintains the athleticism necessary for college football. He was often found in study tables dressed in street clothes, in contrast to the football training gear so popular with his peers. Favoring bright colors and unusual garb, Andrew stood out for more than his height. He often caused distractions at study table and regularly engaged in noise and arguments with peers and staff alike.

Andrew has a quick wit and intelligence, he freely admits he does not work hard on schoolwork and claims he could change his ways anytime and do well in school:

It's [schoolwork] not that tough, if I try I can usually do it okay, just math I find more hard. I just don't really try, I mean not try it's like, I just get caught up in other stuff. Procrastinate a lot. And I sleep a lot and video games too.

It bothers Andrew that his poor grades have kept him on study table. "It [study table] doesn't help, you get nothing done." My observations of Andrew at study table found that Andrew accomplished little beyond distracting others. He commented, "I know I annoy them but it's just how it is, you all sit there like little kids." As a junior classman, Andrew is now in good academic standing, but has flirted with dismissal, having been on academic probation previously. He stated, "You realize they mean business so you get it done." His GPA is close enough to a 2.0 that he remains on the danger list for the academic staff, "they don't realize I am done with that, I can pass any class I want really but still the coaches got me on study table." Andrew lives in a house with a group of football players who are very successful academically, and it is in the house that he tends to get his homework done. "I get my homework done there not at study tables, they are all serious, I work better there. Indeed, the group that he rooms with includes student-athletes who are business and pre-med majors.

Like many student-athletes, Andrew was recruited with many promises of the wonderful achievements he could attain in the classroom, and like many before him this has not played out. In Andrew's case this has been a result of his own doing which he admits:

I was going to go to Kelley (Business School), but it never was likely I suppose. As a freshman I said I was a business major though. Then I went Sports

Marketing and couldn't do it there either, ended up General Studies. I just want a degree now really.

While realizing that his own actions caused him to be in academic jeopardy, Andrew did talk a lot about the lack of academic support from coaches and how he now wishes things had worked out differently. He commented,

It goes by so fast, I just goofed off but it was too late to change things. They have to realize that and make you do better. If they had cared more I wouldn't have been in trouble.

Living around other team members who are successful in the classroom has helped him realize he is clever enough to do better, but he also recognizes that he lacks the motivation to put in the required work, "it's too late now, but if I'd been pushed I'd be there."

Andrew is a first generation college student who grew up in an environment where it was expected he would attend college. Many of his high school graduating class are attending this institution or other universities although most are not student-athletes, "I know lots from high school I see them around the buildings all the time." Andrew does not mix much with non-athletes, preferring the company of his team mates or students from other sports. He dates a girl from another team, someone who grew up near him although she attended a different high school, "We met at study tables, she is good for me, keeps me out of trouble. Before I went home a lot"

Living close to home and driving a nice car, Andrew talked about the distractions of home:

Freshman year I went back all the time, my friends at home were all still in high school so I'd go up there a lot, take off from study table or whatever. It really hurt me now that I look back at it.

For Andrew, growing up playing sports in his high school gave him a certain identity that has carried into college:

Because of my height, I played basketball since I was a kid and I was a bit of a star so I got lots of attention. I went to a pretty much all White school system and all the Black guys you met played sports. It's like here really. I took up football late [junior year], I still got lots of friends through it.

His relatively late introduction to football is another factor that distinguishes Andrew from his teammates, most of whom had already played organized football for several years by the time they reached college. Andrew is still negotiating a lot of the growing pains that a relative newcomer to the sport has to experience:

I get the coaches mad as I don't always do what they want and they think I am being stupid or something but I'm still learning. Growing up I always wanted to play in the NBA (National Basketball Association). Then basketball just stopped happening and I went to football. I don't think about the NFL. Well I do, everyone does, they are lying if they say that but I mean I have so far to go. One injury anyway and it could be over, there's guys that happens to, I keep getting hurt so I know you are just one play away from ending it all.

Andrew admitted that injuries and fatigue affected his studies, "When you're hurt or beat up or just tired you don't want to open a book." He had never been injured during a game, but he sustained many injuries during practice, and these were of an intensity that he had not expected. He commented, "Practice here is tougher than anything I did in high school. In high school I never really felt it."

Andrew is one of those people who almost seem too smart for their own good, he had an answer to everything yet ultimately, he was struggling academically. At times it seems that life is maybe just too easy for him. Andrew was a willing participant who exuded quick thinking and intelligence and seemed to enjoy talking about his experiences. He was important to the study because he added different perspectives on

many levels. He talked considerably about his struggles yet framed them in a way that suggested everything was bad fortune as opposed to anything self-inflicted

Blake

Blake is a 19 year old sophomore who also hails from the neighboring capital city. His home neighborhood is considered to have low socio-economic status with substandard housing, high crime rates, and poorly performing schools. There are huge problems with poverty and unemployment and few students from the area attend college. Blake is a first generation college student who had to be sponsored to gain admission to the institution. He is an intense individual who seems to allow himself to get caught up in the antics of others. This has given him a reputation as something of a troublemaker. Blake was the last member of the group to be interviewed and he initially appeared, to be the least articulate and intelligent of the group, but as I spent more time with him, I began to realize that he merely had difficulty articulating his thoughts.

Blake is planning to be a Criminal Justice major and hopes someday to become a corrections or law enforcement officer. There is some irony here, as he has a catalog of run-ins with the law during his short time in college, none of which have resulted in criminal convictions. However, the coaching staff has given him considerable grief over these altercations:

I keep getting caught with the fellas, I mean I know it's stupid and I can say no but it seems to always happen to me. The coaches really get on my case, blame me and stuff cause it's like one of their favorites I'm caught with. We got in trouble with the RA's (resident assistants) in the dorms for breaking stuff. That was real stupid, then at Denny's (restaurant). They threatened the cops that time, then my boys came down from [home town] and the cops drew guns on us for nothing, we were just in the wrong place or something. I never actually been

fined or anything but I been in jail for the night. Handcuffs a lot of times. I'm just unlucky.

He attributes some of this to growing up in the inner-city where the police may have been busier with more pressing matters. "Down here they got too many cops and nothing to do. Back home you hardly saw them." Regardless, this pattern of getting into trouble is hopefully behind him as he needs to focus more on his academics.

Incidents with instructors had also led to disciplinary measures for Blake, "They said I plagiarized or something, I don't know what I was supposed to have done." The cheating accusation cost him in class, led to a failure of the assignment and ultimately he failed the class. It also added to a sense of frustration with faculty. "Like I said they don't like football players. Or Black folks. Or anyone doesn't sound like them." Blake does not have the huge bulk that others on the team have but he is very lean and as an African-American who is always found wearing football regalia to class he will undoubtedly be recognized as a football player by others at the institution.

Blake does have an academic plan and feels it is achievable, although for him he admits it will not be easy:

I figure I can be a cop, I mean that would rock. I am fast I could catch anyone that runs. Tough though cause I have to get through math and a language, no easy degree for me. I hate that, have to study and take those classes at good times.

He has so far avoided academic probation, but generally his grades have not been good. He is quite strategic in his academic plans, choosing to do the best he can in the easier, filler classes to boost the D grades he often receives in the more rigorous classes. He stated, "I know some classes be tough, I can ace the easy ones and stay safe." This has been a successful plan so far, but one fears he may get caught out in classes such as

mathematics. “I am behind on math, I got to catch up with it, do some classes to get me ready.” According to the NCAA rules, these remedial classes do not count for eligibility for student-athletes so he may be forced into a major with minimal math requirements. Blake seems to understand his limitations on the field a bit better than his peers although he still has a dream of playing professionally.

Blake was recruited at a position where his team is considered very strong nationally so he realizes that breaking through would be difficult. Despite this comprehension, he still finds it difficult to situate football as a lower priority in his life:

For so long football has been it, you know. I mean I know this is a great chance for me, get a great job with a degree too. Still, it's tough not giving it all to football. Coaches still be on you in practice, don't really care much though about you. Just want you to watch film all the time.

Blake has not given up on the chance that his football will improve and that he will get better and therefore achieve more playing time, but deep down he seems to realize that his career will be something outside of sports. He has done more than anyone else in this group to forge relationships outside of the athletic environment, often attending events on campus and studying with groups of non-athletes.

Initially, Blake avoided non-athletes and preferred to spend any study time around his athletic peers; he has developed and now realizes that his life can become easier if he studies more efficiently. To this end he seeks out non-athletes who he has found can help him, “You find the smart kids and get help.” He understands that college is much different from high school and that he took too long to fully appreciate this:

In high school no one cared at all, I mean I can't maybe explain it too well but just no one done anything. I played on the [football] team so I had to pass so many classes and go and shit like that but I had buddies who never went at all. If

they did they slept in class, goofed off, that shit. No one cared. You couldn't find study groups cause no one had to study. I came here thinking it would be like that. I was wrong there, found that out real fast.

Blake rooms with fellow study participant Richard. Personality wise they seem like an odd couple, but when they interacted in study tables there was an obvious friendship and mutual respect present. Blake commented about Richard, "He drive me crazy sometimes. He doesn't care about anything but football. You go places and he just acts stupid, he cool though. Good guy."

Blake appears to be very concerned with how others perceive him. He commented on the importance of joining in with things on campus, both for his own academic success and for the perception of the football team in the campus community.

I guess I care too much about what others think of me. Sometimes I work with smart kids, you know in group work or something and they act like you can't be as good as them. They speak better, sound smarter. Doesn't mean they are though. That really bugs me. I always have worried about others, my dad used to be good at telling me not to care. He is gone though. I hate it when they think we stupid. They should work our day and see how they handle it. You ever seen a play book? Tougher than anything you get for homework.

The divorce of his parents, and the sudden early death of his father had a very profound effect on Blake's emotions. Blake grew up with several stepfathers, but none made any connection with him and he often reminisced about his late father. He cared deeply for his mother and siblings but most of his familial conversations centered on his dad:

I really wish my dad was alive, he was the guy I'd call and we could talk. I'd have not gotten in any trouble if he was around. He would have been so proud of me. Getting to college and on a football scholarship. Sucks.

He worries a lot about his mother and her new husband, “She doesn’t have me there now. I looked after her.” He is the oldest child and has two younger brothers and a younger step-sister at home:

I worry about what’s going on there, I could get crazy growing up but it’s much worse now, drugs, shootings, not safe sometimes to leave your door.

These distractions all serve to cause Blake additional pressure that interferes with his college life, but he does understand the need to succeed in college. “This is my chance.”

Blake was a participant who brought some different attitudes to the table.

Although he had issues with the establishment in regard to faculty and instructors and to some degree his coaches, he was very honest and forthright about everything he talked about. He mixed more on campus than others, he had more meaningful, positive interactions with non-athletes and he has a real academic plan that is achievable. He is clearly distracted by negative influences so I would hope that he can get those out of his life then keep using campus resources and continue to improve upon his academics.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

The findings from interviews with six student-athletes, all members of the football team, are presented in this chapter. The participants have all been introduced in the previous chapter and the same pseudonyms are used. Throughout this chapter, the actual lived experiences of the student-athletes are revealed through the verbatim responses of the participants. These findings provide a rich and meaningful examination of what it is like to be an African-American Division 1 football player at a large research university. The following chapter is arranged according to the themes in which they engage: 1) The role of athletics, 2) Close relationships and important people in their lives, 3) Campus relationships and affiliations, 4) Behaviors and acting out, and 5) Distractions at home. These thematic distinctions are further arranged into sub-categories. A summary of the findings concludes this chapter.

The Role of Athletics

Despite the fact that the focus of this study is on the lived academic lives of a group of student athletes, the participants continually referred to the athletic factor of their existence. This is the most salient theme that emerges from the interviews: the athletic component of their lives appears to be all consuming. All six participants kept on returning to the athletic component in their life and it is apparent that their own image of self revolves around their athletic personae.

It's all about Football

The NCAA, and everyone else associated even loosely with intercollegiate athletics as well, use the term “student-athlete” with the emphasis on the “student” part. The powers that be are clearly making an effort to highlight the fact that athletics is

merely one component in the educational experiences of this population. They are to be described as *students* first, not simply as athletes. In this study, it was apparent that sports, and not academics, were the central reason these young men attended this particular institution. Our subject James commented: “I don’t feel I have nothing in common with non-athletes”. This sentiment, in one form or another, was echoed by most of the others. Blake, who was always intense and deep, stated: “They [the general student body] have their things and we have ours. I do hardly nothing with peeps not on the team.” In later sections I will discuss the interactions on campus and with their peers in more detail, but perhaps Andrew summed up this relationship most effectively when he said: “I stay over here with my boys where no one else sees me. I will never go to the library.” Recognizing their differences openly, his group does not think they are regular students at all.

The participants constantly discussed how athletics was the primary way of self-identification and often appeared to be nothing less than their reason for being. With one exception, this group of students had all played football from an early age and the pride they took in being the ‘big man’ on a high school campus was apparent. Patrick noted: “Football was how I stood out; I really felt it was more than hurting people on the field though that was all good too. I knew everyone saw me and respected me everywhere.” Other participants recalled similar feelings. James, perhaps more introverted than the others, admitted: “I could never be popular and meet girls if it wasn’t for football. “ In keeping on with this theme, Richard continued:

Where I’m from folks got nothing so when you are good at football or basketball you get the respect. I mean, I had nothing really growing up we lived in a shitty apartment and drove old clunkers. Sport made me feel good.

While talking with these student-athletes, the popularity that comes with being a successful jock during the high school years was obvious and was recounted with a sense of some pride. This trend continued throughout their college experiences to date.

Although the institution in this study is by no means a national football powerhouse, there is still considerable prestige to be gained from representing the varsity football team, especially with nationally televised games, luxury travel and accommodation while participating on the road, and lucrative equipment contracts for the university. Patrick asserted: “When we’re on national TV I call up all my boys to watch”, and even if the game’s outcome is unfavorable the exposure that accompanies an appearance on national television is the highlight of a student-athletes existence. Blake talked about what it meant to him:

Even when we are going to get our asses kicked I just hope I can make one big play that gets me props and my name and picture on the screen. I’m representing for the whole hood then. I get adds on facebook and all kinds of texts.

When the football team travels to road games they receive VIP treatment from start to finish. Police escorts accompany them and all traffic is halted so that there are no delays. Private jets sometimes fly them to faraway road games and accommodation and food is always first class. Needless to say, the student-athletes enjoy this tremendously. Andrew summed it up thus: “We go through these small towns with the sirens and cops stopping everyone and you feel like you’ve got these massive props.” Justin states:

You grow up thinking about this, there’s tens of thousands of fans outside the stadium and they are all giving you the finger and shit, but its all good, they are stopping the traffic for you, you know what I’m saying. There’s no feeling like it, I think sometimes that I’m like a rap star in a limo, it’s the same feeling.

Richard who grew up in a tough inner-city environment stated: "I couldn't believe it on my first road trip. I had never ever seen a hotel like we stayed in." The material luxuries enjoyed by intercollegiate football players are a much enjoyed perk. This group of young men all grew up in a cultural environment where name brand sports clothing is valued, and expensive brand name apparel entitles those who wear them to respect and even provokes jealousy within other campus groups.

Pride in the Merchandise

Within all athletic departments at American universities commercial enterprise plays a major role in the funding of sports. At the larger institutions this is a very competitive area with sports apparel companies such as Nike, Adidas and others paying millions of dollars annually to have athletic teams endorse their equipment. The student-athletes are the beneficiaries of this and in the revenue sports such as football and men's basketball players are outfitted for free in clothing and shoes that have a retail value of several hundred dollars. It is a source of great pride for these student-athletes to be seen in the newest sports gear. There are, however, negative consequences to this "look" as well, which we shall discuss in later sections of the current study.

The participants spoke enthusiastically about receiving this equipment and the feelings of superiority it inspired. "It's like Christmas when you go to the equipment room" stated Andrew, while Richard remarked: "It's tight walking around with the new stuff we get, it's like everyone knows how special we are." Blake even found time to complain about the brand name of the apparel. He stated in a serious tone that: "I wish we had Nike, if I could do this over again I'd have chose a Nike school". It is easy to see

that these student-athletes feel very special. This confidence can, however, border on entitlement and elitism, a legacy from their high school days that continues through college and ideally for them, beyond.

Dreams about playing on a Sunday

One topic that continually came up in interviews with all of the participants was the likelihood, or dream, of playing professionally after college. The odds are heavily stacked against any college player making it to the professional ranks with less than 2 percent of college athletes going on to play in the professional ranks (Washington, 2009). The institution in this study has not historically had a lot of success in this area. Despite these historical precedents, all of the student-athletes here all alluded to their chances of playing at the next level. They all possessed varying degrees of expectation; that is, they all knew the odds of making it to the professional ranks were extremely low, but they still believed that they could be the one. Andrew was realistic enough: "I'm a long way off but with my size I know someone will look at me", while Richard mused on the subject:

It's like I know how hard it would be but I really think I have a shot. I don't get much time right now but I'm getting bigger and stronger, just need one scout to see me. Once I'm a senior I will know.

Justin believed that it was the lack of success of his team that prevented him from being more highly regarded as a prospect for the NFL: "I have the game to go pro but sometimes you don't get the protection. Pro scouts will see that, if I had pro's around me I could play in that league. [I] guarantee it." Patrick had a different take along the same lines:

Playing on a team that's losing kind of helps for the next level, your numbers go up because you're always out there, on defense I mean. You get beat up more, more injuries. Still, they see you more; your numbers sure look good.

The second theme that emerged from the interviews was that of the people in the student-athletes lives who were the most influential and important to them.

The Folks at Home

All of the participants made regular references to the personal relationships that comprised their support systems while navigating their college experiences. The relationships that are described here with family, coaches and teammates all have tremendous importance in the lives of the study participants. While it is evident that there are strong positive influences in the academic experiences attached to these relationships, all of the relationships have a certain ambiguity attached; in many regards, the relationships are detrimental to the success of these young men.

Parental circumstances differed among the participants but it was evident that doing the right thing for those at home was extremely important. Five of the six participants spoke at length about their families and gave full deference and appreciation to their respective parents and extended families. For several, it was apparent that grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins could be just as important to the student-athletes as parents, guardians, and siblings. As Blake commented; "Everyone back home is just so proud of me coming to play football here." Justin, who comes from an area where few consider attending college, also talked about the responsibility he felt to be successful for his family.

When I get down a bit and my grades are sucking and stuff, I think of my moms and all that and it makes me want to do better. When I got into here and we had the signing day it was such a big deal for everyone. My moms, my coach at high school, all the fellas. My cousins all came over and the pastor and everything it was just such a great time coz they had all this food and I felt great. Then when I

left to go for camp they through another party and everyone told me how proud they were. Man that was one of my best days.

The participants were aware, to different degrees, of the opportunity that college was providing them, and they all experienced their new college environments with different degrees of trepidation. Andrew had many friends from his high school at the institution but admitted he was worried about the possibility of failing, “in high school you always got there, they wouldn’t let you fail but here you can.” Several mused on how unprepared they felt for the college environment they faced. Blake stated: “Everyone said good luck, go do well, but none really knew anything about college. [My parents] never went. I thought it would be like high school” Patrick continued:

Before I came to college I sat with my [high school] coach and he gave me a heads up. He made it sound like I was going to a different planet and I got there for [summer] camp and it was just the team and it was all good, you know. I forgot what he told me. Then school starts and it just changes. There’s all these people and they seem to know where to go and where to be. In class they are all so smart I was like, damn what’s going on here. He was the only one that gave me advice before I left that was worth anything, I called him a lot first week of classes.

The Vital Role Played by Coaches

Student-athletes become so wrapped up in their sports that for many their relationship with coaches can take on added significance. Some student-athletes are actually closer to their coaches than they are with their parents. Examining and attempting to understand the relationship between a student-athlete and a coach is very important to studies of this nature. It is likely that on a big-time college football team, none of the contributing players would attend that institution if it were not for the sport. The subject of coaches is one that the student-athletes allude to often. Coaches earned positive comments in areas of dedication to their jobs, technical ability as football

coaches, and moral support toward the student. Several students talked about the very long hours coaches spent in preparation for upcoming contests by watching film and drawing up plans. “They’ve got your backs, they want you to be successful” commented James. Blake continued: “Without them you wouldn’t be here and you can’t play without them.” It was also note-worthy that when describing the coach’s shortcomings all of the student-athletes took much longer in answering and appeared to give considerably more thought before sharing their experiences.

Many collegiate student-athletes begin receiving flattering recruiting overtures as early as middle school, and by the time they commit to a college they typically have built a close relationship with the coach who recruited them. Recruiting is often done regionally, with each coach responsible for certain areas of the country. For example, it is possible that a defensive player may be recruited by an offensive coach, depending on the region where the student-athlete lived and attended high school. Upon his arrival at the new institution an incoming student-athlete can turn up feeling a bond with the coach responsible for recruiting him. It is the perception of many student-athletes that this important connection has lessened in importance or has ended.

As Justin reported, “Coach R recruited me real hard, harder than any other school. I thought he was my friend you know, lots of promises about degrees and playing time but since I got here I haven’t hardly seen him.” Andrew takes it a bit further: “They tell you anything to get you here. [According to the coaches] I was going to go to the business school, not have to study much, and life was all good....I get here and it’s a whole different story.” Richard continues with this and expounds a bit more on the coaches:

The coaches own you and they know it and for most of the time they treat you like shit you know. I mean they care yet all they care about is winning and all. I had heard how they strung you along but they are so good at it, I really thought I was all different and special. You get here and it changes, they act all boss like and always telling you what to do. Then you miss class or you're late to lift and they make you run like it's a big deal. I can run all day. That doesn't hurt me. Who cares? Sometimes you really feel used.

Football has an organizational structure that is peculiar to its compartmentalized nature. A head coach generally has many position coaches who report to him. For the participants in this study, interactions with the head coach were limited compared to the daily meetings with position coaches. All of the participants had positives to say regarding the personality of the head coach yet wished they had more access to him. As Blake commented, "he [the head coach] is a really caring guy, treats you well and stuff. He never sees you but once or twice, you know you're not important."

The coaches are held accountable for their player's eligibility and progress so they are involved to some extent with the academic side of the players' college experience. The players did not have many positive comments regarding the relative priority their coaches granted to academics. In the case of Andrew, who freely admitted he was never the hardest working student, this was not necessarily a bad thing:

They play at caring you know, I mean Coach T cares but he is kind of different. The rest of them just want you to lift and get big and watch [game] film all the time. As long as you're passing they are fine. When you get bad grades they start acting like they cared along so they don't get in trouble but they don't, it's a big scam.

Others were more critical regarding their coaches' apparent ambivalence towards academics. Each of the participants related how in some way the coaches were easier to be around when the team was winning. Blake stated quite succinctly: "They get paid for

wins and losses not degrees.” Patrick, who came to college saddled with poor college preparation due to attending a low performing high school, tried to articulate his feelings:

You just can’t talk to him [the position coach]. You try to talk and tell him what’s going wrong but he always has all the answers you know. Then you get punished and you’re not deserving it. It really sucks, it’s like he just won’t ever listen to reason. No matter how much I tell the truth and the excuse is for real, like I was sick or something he just makes you run.

There was frequent mention of the punishment handed out by coaches. These sentences always appeared to be in the form of excessive physical exercise, including step running, wind sprints, etc all performed before breakfast. Blake stated, “some guys have to sit and miss games but they wouldn’t do it to anyone who was a starter. You just run till you puke, I mean it’s no fun but you handle it.”

Patrick recalled upperclassmen who warned him that the coaches want students to take the easy road; “My boy George told me he had to get out of tough classes as it interfered with football.” Although there were no reports that actually stated that the coaches ordered players not to pursue challenging coursework, but all of the participants had heard such anecdotes from teammates and knew instinctively that their focus was to be almost exclusively on sports. The prevailing perception among the participants was that academics should not interfere with football. The group was certainly aware of the power coaches held, especially regarding playing time and their development as football players. Blake stated; “My position has depth so they will make an example of you and not give you time if you question them.” This promotes competitiveness among the players but for the most part there was no petty bickering among the players about their playing time. There was always a feeling of solidarity among the student-athletes on the football team.

Team Camaraderie

Despite many little factions existing within the football team, the players generally would appear to have a good level of camaraderie; much natural humor and frivolity existed between teammates, as would be expected from a group of young men who spend a great deal of time together often in an adversarial environment. It is readily apparent that the football players recognize the unique nature of the group they comprise and, as such, look out for each other. Patrick commented, "There's guys on the team who you maybe don't like but they are still your boys. Everyone's got your back. I mean people hit harder in practice maybe, fight a bit but that's football." It is evident that the players view their teammates as a support system in academic matters, as instruments of making the experience easier. Andrew stated:

Older guys tell you who the best professors are and the worst too. You know who gives the good grades and doesn't report you if you don't turn up. Some profs are easy A's others don't take attendance, you know. If they hate football they tell you so that you drop those classes fast.

The academic culture of the team suffers greatly from the machismo often associated with male sports teams. For many of the players, being considered one of the guys is of paramount importance. This compulsion to fit in manifests itself within the context of the team with a culture of academic avoidance where to be seen to be engaged in academics is somehow less manly. All of the participants spoke of a need to hide any academic endeavors around their peers. "If they see you studying anywhere but study tables you get made fun of. Even at study tables you're supposed to try not to do schoolwork" said Blake. Andrew added: "My girlfriends on a team and they all study on buses and on the road in rooms. We would never try that. They would laugh you off the

team.” It is apparent that the academic side of the student-athlete experience on the football team is a far cry from being a priority.

Groups often align on the team by position, home town or state, and occasionally by race. There were several comments from the participants regarding differences between players, particularly those involving racial distinctions and the inherent difference between urban and rural settings. According to Richard: “The White guys on the team blend in more, they have White friends and girlfriends and in the classes they don’t really stand out.” Justin, who hails from a rural background, said: “The guys make fun of me you know, like I’m just a big dumb farm boy or something. It’s all good though, I can take it.” It is clear that the team culture creates bonds that operate along two distinct vectors, one that promotes unity among teammates and within subgroups, and another that systematically excludes academic endeavors. The next section will cover the different relationships that the student-athletes have made to date on campus.

Campus relationships and affiliations

Part of the controversy regarding intercollegiate athletics relates to the removal of athletics from campus and the perennial question; are student-athletes really students or is it all a pretense? (Bendford, 2007) When players responded to the questions I posed regarding academics, they generally mentioned the following topics: professors and instructors, academic advisors and support staff in the athletic department, various mentors who become role models or assist with homework, and other students on campus. The participants spoke often about professors and instructors although they generally could not distinguish between the two. It was also evident that the participants

assessed the performance of instructors and advising staff according to how accommodating they were to the players needs. As a result, faculty or staff members who were previously considered favorably by the students often went down in esteem subsequent to issuing a poor grade to an athlete or failing to cater to their whims.

Faculty and Staff

Relations, as reported by the participants in this study, between the faculty and the students are negative bordering on adversarial. “They hate us because we play football”, “They totally hate athletes”, and “Once they know you’re a football player they pick on you” were comments from Richard, Blake, and James respectively. Justin had this to say:

I’m not that big but I wear football gear that I get for free. On the first day in this nothing class, study skills or something, the professor asked me right out if I was an athlete. Like I just had to be an athlete cause I’m Black in [school athletic] gear. I felt just I don’t know, like they were singling me out like I was in a zoo or something. They never do this with anyone else.

Other instructors were criticized for the practice of singling out student-athletes for being athletes in some attempt at fake sincerity only to then unfairly penalize in graded assignments. “They act like they want to be your friend, go on about athletes like they love football, then your grade sucks when you do a good job” related Justin.

Many comments referred to perceptions that as well as being anti-jock, some of the professors and instructors were racist. Although further probing did not reveal any explicit racist acts or statements, the race theme kept coming up from several of the participants. “Professors are all racist, it’s like they don’t think we should be there” was a comment from James. Further questions about the attitudes towards African-American

students who were not athletes did not elicit any more claims of racism. Stories from older members of the team may have played a part in these perceptions and it is highly probable that class teachers were being criticized for some imagined slight or a defense mechanism is in play. There is no evidence forthcoming that this occurred. The campus connection that most student-athletes look to first is their academic advisor and many comments were made regarding this group.

Academic advisors have a job as ‘go-betweens’ between the student-athletes and the coaching staff so by the very nature of the job there are constant changes in the relationship dynamics. The student-athletes in this study spoke in favorable tones about their advisors but once more, they had positive and negative comments regarding this group often in relation to advisors letting them down by giving the student-athletes a negative response to a request. In the interests of confidentiality I have disguised the true names of the advising staff, and the nom-de-plumes chosen for the advising group are Robin, Chris, and Taylor. These names will be used in place of the occasions when ‘he’ or ‘she’ appears in the transcripts and it is hoped that such gender neutral names will protect their anonymity.

One common theme emerging from the interviews regarding the advisors is that in the eyes of the participants of this study, the advisors job is to help them when things go wrong. All of the subjects commented on how the advisors looked out for them in a variety of ways and were a source of comfort and solace when things were getting on top of them. “Robin’s got your back, I can always go and yea maybe Robin will yell at me a bit but it never last long and we get it taken care of” was a statement by Blake regarding his advisor. Andrew stated:”With Taylor you have to you know, let Taylor act all bossy

and important but Taylor really can help you. Taylor knows all the classes and can help you with your coaches.” Meanwhile, James had this to say:

I had this guidance counselor back in high school and he was like this guy who just wanted to ride you all the time, always giving you hell for any little thing. Here I wasn’t too sure [about the advisor] but after I messed up and Chris got me through it, it was all good. After that we were straight. You meet other students and they never see their advisors and we meet a couple of times a week. It’s tight.

The group appeared to get more negative when they did not get what they wanted. James complained about Robin, ”Robin thinks [Robin is] my coach or something, loves to tell you no and shit.” This highlights the difficult role advisors have where they have to be friendly yet not friends with the students. NCAA eligibility rules demand that academic progress is made and sometimes advisors have to break bad news.

Taylor had me going towards the business school but I messed up a bit and had to go General Studies. I mean I didn’t want to go there cause it’s like special ed in high school almost but Taylor talked to my coaches and my mom and told them it wasn’t so bad and I’d no choice anyway. I probably deserved it, I didn’t do much that semester.

It is clear that the advisors are a big part of academic success for the students as are a variety of other staff.

Academic assistance is reinforced by an academic support staff of mentors and tutors as well as faculty sponsors who meet regularly with their sponsored student-athletes, other athletic department personnel, and assorted role-models found on campus. Five of the six participants in this study have faculty sponsors who they met with during their first semester at least three times a semester and for some more often. Reaction to this involvement was mixed. Justin felt that his faculty sponsor did not care much, ”It’s like they too busy for me”, while James commented, ”It’s a waste of time, she talks down

to you and acts like it's this huge favor." Richard was more upbeat about his relationship with his faculty sponsor: "He cool. He cares about me and helped me a lot that first semester." Blake had this to say:

I wasn't that sure [about it] but you know, it's all good. When we met he wasn't so friendly, like he came across as like a coach. Once we met a few times though he saw how I was trying in school and he gets props from me. I still meet him, not like so intense now or nothing but we hang and chill. I got no problems texting him, like when I aced a test that I was scared of he was the first guy I told. It's like one more guy pulling for you. Caring about you.

Tutors and Mentors

Mentors are another study aid frequently used by the athletic department to assist the student-athletes. All of the football players in this study were given a mentor in their first semester and the majority of them reported it to be a beneficial experience. Andrew spoke about how having a mentor helped him be a better student.

I procrastinate. I mean I really procrastinate. Study halls from eight to ten and I wouldn't do jack till about five minutes to go. Once I got my mentor she kept me focused and on top of it. I didn't want to do any history, I mean I hated it and was failing but she broke it up for me and we got there. I need it you know, one more person got your back.

James reported that he felt a real bond with his mentor, a graduate student: "She was so smart and just was always there. I still use her later in the semester when its crunch time." Patrick commented, "he really helped me and was cool, he was like this really smart guy but knew what was going on. Study tables are nuts with all the guys being crazy all the time. Me and him would joke around and all but he got me started."

In addition to mentors employed by the athletic department, many of the participants spoke of relationships with people they saw as role models who were former

student-athletes or African-American faculty or staff they had met. Justin offered his thoughts on one positive influence:

Jim comes to talk to the team a lot. He played here and then went pro. Now he works in the athletics department raising money or something. I got to talk to him one day when he was in the gym and I go back to his office sometimes to hang. I think he is kind of a lot like me, came from a small town and came here and struggled in class, Black guy. He helps me handle a lot of it, you know he has been there, done that. He knows what it's like to go through all of this and he was like one of the best this program ever had you know, hall of famer and that. When he tells you, you know it's straight.

Several of the participants talked of similar figures within the athletic department as well as other campus resources. Blake talked about his experience:

This guy, Dwayne, from the Black student place came to my class and I remembered him from [freshman orientation] camp. He handed out stuff and I saw him at this table in the union and he said hello to me and talked about remembering [me]. Since then I got involved a bit, not in fall cause we are so busy but in the offseason. It's been tight, people like you there when they know you're an athlete. You get more attention.

Another important part of the student-athletes experience is how they relate to other campus students.

Campus Relations with Other Students

When the participants talked about their relationships with other students on campus, non student-athletes, much of the discussion focused on race. It was evident that as African-Americans on a predominately White campus they all felt somewhat out of place. When the athletic component is thrown in it can become more complicated. For Patrick and Richard who grew up in a mostly African-American non-White community their new environment was very different. "I was just standing there down where the classes are all at and I just looked around and it was like damn! Everyone was White. Everyone" stated Patrick. James found his difficulties occurred within the classroom

setting, "you can be in these huge-ass classrooms and there maybe one or two brothers in there but there's hundreds of kids. You just stand out. You feel every ones looking at you. Clam up." Many of the university students are proud of the athletes representing their alma maters and try to befriend athletes which can have different meanings to each of the participants in this study. Andrew was the only one in the group to take this in his stride, perhaps because of his upbringing. "College isn't that different from high school. It was like that there too; mostly White kids and any Blacks [within the general student population] were on the team."

Andrew liked the attention from girls but found the attention from males a bit less easy to take, "freshman year in the dorms you get lots of crazy girls in the dorms love football players. Some of the boys want to be seen with you though. They are weird. Kind of freaky, don't know what that's about." The players in this study generally welcomed the attention that they received but there was always a separation between them and the regular student body. As Blake stated, "you always get the attention, the kids that want to be with you, especially after a big win. It's all good but they are never my boys you know, you just hang with them for a little." Student-athletes often are in classes where they are forced to interact in group work with non-athletes. Blake commented that, "you learn from them a bit, you know the smart kids who get straight A's." The study participants all readily shared perceptions that students did not respect them academically but there were few explicit instances shared where this was seen to be the case. Blake however stated that he felt on one clear situation his student peers did not respect him intellectually. "We did this group project and they wouldn't let me speak, I mean I could tell. Especially in the presentation. I just sat back and took the A. I should

have said something but never did.” The football players in this study repeatedly reported that they felt they were unfairly stigmatized by just looking like athletes and had no opportunity to prove differently in class.

As previously reported the football student-athletes take great pride in wearing their top of the range sports apparel around campus; there is a down side to this as it is not always advantageous to stand out as a student-athlete. Andrew summed up the situation:

You’re in this big class and you walk in maybe like a few minutes late because you have to come from the gym and everyone sees you. You’re the biggest guy in the room by about 100 pounds and the AI (Associate Instructor) glares at you and you just know he hates athletes and you stand out. Some days you wear street clothes but usually you come from workouts and don’t have time to change. I hate it when they all look at you all negative like that.

All the student-athletes commented on how they stood out in a manner that was negative, with James commenting:”You are just so busy, always got to be somewhere. You wear your [school athletic] gear because you don’t have time to change.” The situation where young men in an unfamiliar environment feeling stigmatized at the perception that they are only admitted to college due to athletic prowess, adds to academic issues.

Behaviors and Acting Out

When I asked these student to talk about the times when you chose to engage in behavior academically that you knew would hurt your grades, I got a wealth of interesting responses. While this entire football group liked to blame others, especially professors and instructors, for their academic shortcomings most of them acknowledged that at some point they contributed with negative behaviors. This behavior falls under the

general category of *locus of control*, assessing the extent to which they themselves or others were responsible for their grades. The pattern for these admissions was predictable among the group being interviewed; they would mention it, laugh it off, and then agree that their conduct was not likely to play a role in any academic success. While acknowledging internal locus of control, there was no sense that they planned to change their behaviors. Areas of concern regarding this behavior was in class attendance, completing homework and assignments, acting out in class, and failing to work with available tutors.

Conduct that Causes Academic Issues

Every person in this study admitted to missing class frequently. Although intercollegiate events cause student-athletes to often miss class, this group of football players did not once cite travel or competition as an excuse for missing class. Every class absence appeared to be a choice made by the individual. The student-athletes were aware of the ambiguity surrounding this behavior. Andrew stated, “Everyone said go to class” while Blake was more introspective:

They kept going on about it at camp when we had these classes and the panels. All the ex-players and the advisors and professors that came in. Go to class, go to class you know. I thought, of course I’ll go to class. Why wouldn’t you. Then, halfway through the semester my advisors yelling at me because I’ve been skipping and I just hadn’t even realized.

The most common excuse was that the hectic life of a student-athlete made them too busy to complete academic tasks and assignments. As Patrick explained, “it’s too tight a schedule. You’re up at 5:30 and lifting at 6. By the time you get to eat class has started and you just don’t go.” Andrew admitted to procrastination as well as being too fond of video games: “You get back to your room and you’re on Facebook or start playing

games and the time just flies in. Video games kind of addict me, they cause me a lot of time problems.” Tiredness after conditioning was also a common excuse. Richard shared the following on his typical physical state.

I thought I was in shape coming here but man, not close. I work out so hard I often literally puke. I am sore all day, I wear ice packs half the time and when I left here freshman year I have to walk past the dorm. I’d lie down and next thing it was noon. Missed class again, advisors gonna be yelling.

Life in the residence halls was a common excuse for feeling fatigued. “Man those kids party all night, I would go out and yell at them all the time” stated Justin. Blake summed up the difference in dorm life for non-athletes and athletes:

They [students in the dorms] sleep all afternoon then party all night. Every night. They have no thought or care that we would be up so early to work out. I couldn’t wait to move. I just napped 24/7 to catch up. Probably missed a whole load of classes.

Missing class due to academic shortcomings was also admitted, although sometimes in a grudging manner. Andrew reported: “I would have something due and I’d forget to do it so what was the point in going.” Richard gave a lot of thought to his answers in this area:

You get these assignments for homework or papers and it’s like you know you’re never going to give them what they [the professors] want. I mean, the tutors help you and you do your best but it’s never going to be good enough, you know. A good tutor makes you feel better but you can just tell they don’t think its that good. That’s when you just don’t even bother turning it in, if they are going to fail you for it.

Feeling that one did not belong in the classroom environment was a common feeling among this group with all of them having something to say about this. It has been reported previously that the students feel they stand out in class by their appearance and

physical presence; additionally, this group reported feelings of not-belonging in class in relation to the material often covered in the class. Richard stated:

You get told all the time to participate, that you get free points for sitting in the front and talking to the profs. I have no ideas sometimes what they are on about, they use these words and I'm like, what are you talking about?

Andrew followed up with his experiences in a math class:

It's a small class so you get to know people and the AI is OK, I mean he is a bit of a smart ass but that's all right usually. You can joke with him. When he makes you come to the board to do problems I just hate it. It stops me from going cause you just feel stupid, especially as I'm the only Black guy in the class and much bigger than everyone. They all see you struggling and I get angry.

Sometimes these feelings of anger or frustration manifest in different reactions.

Several in the study reported acting out in some fashion in the classroom setting although none really could describe properly what was going on. Andrew did try:

I like to get attention you know, make girls laugh and everything. I probably do it more in classes so that I don't have to do school stuff. I guess I'm avoiding it, I don't know. It pisses them [the instructors] off but it's a laugh. One time this guy was so mad, he took it all so serious, you know the class. Probably dissed him big time.

Assignments and Homework

Another area where this group has encountered difficulty academically is with the completion and/or submission of assignments. Technology in the classroom has meant that the days of taking completed assignments to class are becoming fewer and assignments are often submitted online and due at times when class does not meet such as evenings and often by the end of a day. For this group, most of whom went to poorly funded high schools, this proved problematic on many occasions. Blake described the trouble he encountered:

They make it so difficult; you have all these links to get the stuff in. I mean I suppose it's not all like that and you just forget sometimes but if you're like one

minute late you get zero and if you try and just don't submit it on time they don't believe you. High school never had anything like that, school only had a few old computers anyhow.

Patrick talked about how he had similar problems: "My mentor helps a lot with it but it's so confusing." As well as turning in assignments or homework, actually doing the work was a major issue for some of the group although again, tutors, mentors and advising staff reportedly assisted a lot. Patrick stated:

I was always forgetting to do stuff so my advisor set me up with a mentor and they do this check off list and it's much better now. I forget a lot though, you just kind of put it off and time flies by. It's really annoying when you get treated like a kid for it but I suppose it's worth it.

Distractions at Home

With a typical academic course load only taking up between twelve to fifteen hours per week a student's academics are also affected by what happens outside the classroom. Socio-economic status played a role in the differences. While Andrew and Justin rarely mentioned home issues, for the other four who are all from inner-city settings there were many stories of distractions to negatively impinge on their academic performance. Patrick, James, Richard, and Blake were all sophomores at the time of the interviews yet could all relate stories of considerable drama and hardship from their time away at college: family deaths, extended families seriously injured in a shooting, and arrests of childhood friends for drug dealing were some of the adverse circumstances shared by this group.

The Drama Never Goes Away

As previously mentioned, the participants in this group felt personal satisfaction in the positives of college attendance and the subsequent feelings of pride that ensued

were obvious as they told their stories. The separation of the new college existence from the old way of life in their home neighborhoods was still a challenge. As Blake reflected, there were positives to the new opportunities:

When I hear from my boys at home I only seem to hear bad news. It's like I am so lucky to be down here away from all the day-to-day shit in the hood. I feel bad though, wish they were here with me but I'm doing what I gotta do.

Patrick also reminisced about where he grew up but in a more negative way concerning possible distractions toward academics:

I really miss home; I mean not just my moms and family but all the fellas. Sometimes they come down and they just go crazy, it's like no one down here can handle them. We have such a laugh but they get in trouble and I have to be careful. Coach Robinson saw them and gave me a hard time, telling me not to bring them back down here but they are my people you know. They keep calling me asking about me coming back or them coming here on a visit but I have to put them off, I hate doing that, like I'm too good for them or something. I can't make them see it's just how it is for now.

Richard's perspective was similarly destructive although in a different way:

Sometimes I think about just going home, hanging out with the fellas. It's like when things are going bad and the coaches are on me and I'm struggling on the field and homework and classes suck I think of them. They have fun you know, not great jobs or anything but no stresses. Maybe I think about it too much. I suppose it's just cause things get bad, when I go back like when my uncle died I kind of got sick of it too, they act pretty stupid.

Family emergencies seem to take a bigger toll on student-athletes from the lower end of the socio-economic demographic. Andrew, who was raised in a fairly affluent background, talked about getting in his car and driving home whenever he needed to. For Richard having to go home for a family emergency became a major challenge:

My cousin got shot and he was my boy you know, I was really broke up about it so I had to go back. Pay my respects. When I came down here it was about a six hour drive I think, maybe seven no more. Because I can't afford a car and no one could come get me I tried to get some money but NCAA be saying you can't be giving athletes' money so I had to ride the bus. It was a nightmare, I left here and

had to travel forever to get there, I got stuck at a bus depot for like 8 hours or something. I nearly never came back but I got a ride.

Even without the dramatic occurrences at home leaving for college was difficult for some. As James said, "I really got homesick", a sentiment shared by a few of the participants. Blake acknowledged:

I would really get down, I mean it was a lot of things. When you get signed you look forward to it so much but high school is over then your there [at college]. We have [pre-season]camp during summer and you get no time and you're here. Then the semesters stink and you're all beat up and injured and failing a class and every ones on your case. I was so homesick. Then springs a little better but they want you back in the weight room again summer and I had to take classes anyway to be eligible. It's like you don't get a break. I was better though, the first year was much worse. You get over it. A break would be nice though. Summer.

It is clear that the transition for some student-athletes takes longer than others.

Summary of Findings

The primary research question in this study was, "what is it like to be a struggling student-athlete academically?" As discussed throughout this chapter, the student-athletes participating talked about their lives and how they felt 'outsiders' in the campus community. They talked about how important home and familial relationships were yet also how those same associations hindered them. The role of coaches was discussed at length and about how coaches cared about their athletic development and progress but less so about other aspects of their lives especially in regard to academics. The group all shared how special they felt being a part of a big-time football program and the benefits that came with it. Further, they talked about their dreams of continuing in their sport after their four years of college eligibility is over. They also discussed their relationships with the regular student body; how on one hand they felt appreciated as athletic

ambassadors yet on the other thought of as inferior intellectually. These concerns shall continue in the next chapter discussion.

CHAPTER SIX

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of a group of football player student-athletes who are struggling academically. Although studies on student-athlete populations are common, there is little research into what motivates negative academic practices. Why would football players on scholarship not attend class? Why would they not complete and/or hand in assignments? What is the pattern that emerges from their avoidance behaviors? What roles do coaches, teammates, and other students on campus play in this? These questions have not been discussed adequately in the current research.

Factors that affect the academic experience of African American male students were explored in the study. Qualitative research methods were used to investigate the variables that comprise a football player's academic experiences. Specifically, a phenomenological approach guided the collection and analysis of the data. This research method is appropriate for understanding the lived experiences of the participants.

Findings from the research questions

Using semi-structured interviews, data was collected from 6 student-athletes on the football team. I analyzed the transcripts, looking for common themes emerging from the interviews.

The first question was to get a sense of the extent of the athletic identity of the respondents. By having the students talk about their experiences prior to university

matriculation one can better get a sense of who they are. The responses to this question were largely uniform. Life as a high school student-athlete had been one of privilege and entitlement; academics merited only a low priority. As they grow up, African-Americans are culturally bombarded with the dream of being a professional football or basketball player, accompanied of course with images of fame and fortune. None of the participants reported that a college degree was a real aspiration for them; completion of a degree was nothing more than an instrument, a means to an end. Regarding adequate preparation for college, none of the student-athletes interviewed suggested that they arrived at college properly prepared for the academic rigors ahead. The literature relating to the lack of preparation for college for many who fit the demographic being studied here backs up these findings. James (2005) is critical of the lack of academic grounding given to athletes at the high school level in his research. In their study on factors predicting college success, Comeaux and Harrison (2007) found that athletic participation in high school is a detrimental factor, while Sellers (1992) found that African-American athletes were at a further disadvantage transitioning to college. For many high school students there are a number of extracurricular activities other than athletics that may consume their time. Shulman & Bowen (2001) state that high school students involved in non-athletic activities tend to over-perform once reaching college. One study, by Ryska (2002), did reveal a greater level of academic achievement within the student-athlete population who concluded that those student-athletes with high motivation tend to outperform other groups in academics.

The second area of interest was the attention and support the athletes received for accomplishment in athletics. The theme that African-Americans are perceived as athletic

machines with no intellectual capabilities recurs frequently in the literature, and is often the major criticism of intercollegiate athletics and the NCAA (Sailes, 1993; Hawkins, 2000; Smith, 2007). In this study this theme was prominent. All of the participants in this study described how special they felt as football players. The situation where the team travelling to a road game receives an extravagant police escort and traffic is stopped at every intersection highlights the exaggerated importance attached to intercollegiate sporting events. The student-athlete is spoiled constantly, from the first recruiting trip a star athlete makes he is treated to the best in accommodations and entertainment and continues throughout their career. It might be asking too much of young men to keep these experiences in perspective, and it is not surprising that priority is given to athletics. For these students, their daily lives revolve around athletics. Vallerand and Miquelon (2007) propose that when an activity becomes highly valued, this interest becomes a passion and is internalized into a person's identity, and this is the case here, with football becoming a major part of the participants' identity. For a student-athlete, there needs to be a balance between the academic and athletic sides of their identity, and for the football players in this study, the athletic identity was grossly over-represented.

In the next section, I wanted to hear how the participants perceived how the team treated academics. What was the academic culture on the team? This was another question that was answered more or less univocally. The football team culture at this institution is such that academics is considered something to be treated very lightly and avoided whenever possible, especially in team settings. While there is a lack of empirical evidence to substantiate these claims, Gerdy (2009) reports that the public believes the NCAA does not prioritize academics over athletics, and Sperber (2000) cites many

instances where student-athletes treat academics with contempt. In this study, the student-athletes often described the athletic facilities as being a comfort zone and that integration with the general student body was something to be avoided. Watt and Moore (2001) describe this in their chapter in a student services research publication. They go on to discuss how the subsequent isolation from the student body causes them to neglect the student feature of their roles. Watt and Moore additionally reported that student-athletes take a lot of the same classes and further segregate themselves within these classes. This was not apparent in this study.

Within the football team culture there are smaller subcultures and for this small group of African-American student-athletes the culture regarding academics was low priority. Osborne and Walker (2006) study stereotype threat and how for some who achieve highly in other domains (athletics in this case), academic performance may be negative due to withdrawal or disidentification. This research dissertation study replicates Osborne and Walkers findings with all of the participants withdrawing and not identifying as regular students.

Intercollegiate athletic departments hire advising and counseling staff to assist the student-athletes with academic matters. In this research study, all of the student-athletes mentioned their advisor when discussing academics and it was evident that these individuals played an important role in the lives of the players. Responses regarding the advisors were varied, but it appears that they were liked and respected by the student-athletes. The literature is mixed on both the need for separate advisors for student-athletes and for their performance. Sperber (2000) is critical of athletic advisors, stating that they exist only to take the rigor out of a student-athlete's life by finding them easy

classes and majors. Hollis (2001) discusses the need for athletic advisors as NCAA rules and regulations transform student-athletes into a population with unique needs. The caveat for Hollis is when advisors exist only to help the student stay eligible and it is clear that this type of advising does not meet the needs of student-athletes. Athletic departments do offer a myriad of services in life skills and development all designed to help student-athletes outside of the classroom, but none of the interviewees here expressed interest in any of them.

Student-athletes also have access to state-of-the-art academic centers where they can complete their required study table hours and meet with tutors and mentors. In the current study, the participants reported that this was where they did virtually all their homework and studying. Study hall was without exception described as a place where the football players required to be there would do all they could to avoid meaningful school work; the time was marked by goofing off and frequent intervention by athletic department staff. Existing research queries whether this is in the best interests of the student athletes. Hollis's study (2001) looks at different academic services available to student-athletes and reports that athletic department academic facilities far surpassed anything found elsewhere on campus. Hollis reported that most of them took away independence from the students and that they ended up being "coddled by over protective athletic departments" (p.269). In the years since Hollis's study, there has been an explosion of wealth poured into creating bigger and better academic centers so this aspect of the athletic arms race is obviously getting further out of control. Another major reason for the de-emphasis on academics is the environments the coaches foster. This will be addressed later in this chapter.

The next section looked at how the students treated academics. This was a difficult question for these students, perhaps because they wanted to please me at times. Many responses seemed to be what they considered to be the ‘right’ answers, what they thought I wanted to hear. A few of the participants were willing to delve a little deeper, and this, added consideration revealed some interesting responses. One student admitted he took the easy road whenever possible. Others hinted that they would prefer more rigor and academic challenges. Yet these same subjects also talked about how busy they were and how academics took a back seat to everything else in their lives. There was little or no evidence of real academic motivation or goals; they all claimed to want to earn degrees yet offered little in the way of convincing dialogue to support this aspiration. A student-athlete’s immediate goal is to please his coach athletically. At the Division 1 level, this leads to a focus on athletics that is all encompassing, a term that is known as role engulfment (Briggs, 1996). Briggs further reports on the mental and physical toll that athletics takes as a result of this role engulfment. This fatigue leads to a low motivation towards academic endeavors that should follow if the student-athlete is to be successful in the classroom. Having identifiable academic goals is also considered imperative in academic success.

Tinto (1993) cites goal commitment as being a key to success in college and a predictor of persistence. The goal of attending college and completing a degree are two separate components of goal commitment. According to Briggs (1996), student-athletes are committed to attending college to participate in sports and not as committed in obtaining a degree. Student-athletes used to major in *eligibility*, but recent NCAA initiatives demand that academic progress be made (Sperber, 2000). The participants in

this study were mostly in the formative parts of their academic careers yet already, most were on track to end up in majors such as general studies or recreational sports. For these students, this amounted to a last resort after they were unsuccessful in more rigorous academic pursuits. Briggs further reported that football and men's basketball players had lower goal commitments than student-athletes in other sports and found that this was due to aspirations to professional sports following college. This is consistent with the findings in the data in this report; all of the football players in this study had dreams of playing at the next level, despite how unrealistic this may seem based on college athletic performance.

As African-Americans at a PWI, this group of football players had to balance campus life and academics, all while inhabiting a status of a visible minority. One of the interviewees grew up in a predominately White neighborhood with a White student body at his high school. He seemed more or less comfortable in his transition to college but the others all had negative comments about their experiences. This was confirmed in research that an athlete's perceived elite status leads to an increase in discrimination Hyatt (2003). None of the study participants had any stories of overt racism yet all felt uncomfortable on many occasions. Despite not being willing readers or students of contemporary cultural issues, the football players do follow sports avidly and are very 'media-savvy' regarding the sporting issues currently in the news. They were all aware, to varying degrees, of the negative stereotypes towards African-American college football players that exist. The members of this group tended to keep to themselves possibly because of these biases and were generally quite in touch with their racial identity. Given the foregoing reports on the historical lack of success by African-

American students at PWIs, this racial identity adds to the vulnerability and persistence risk (Hatter & Ottens, 1998). Although the participants did recognize the presence of beneficial role-models within the campus community, they still expressed a profound sense of alienation from their environment. As special admits through the faculty sponsor program one may anticipate that for those student-athletes the sense of not belonging may be stronger. Although the sponsored student-athletes all mentioned their relationships with the faculty members who helped them obtain admission to the institution, none discussed any feeling of being a lower status student. There has been limited research in this area. Gurney, Tan, and Winters (2010) reported that special admit student-athletes tend to have low self-esteem and adjustment issues as a result of this status. The results of Gurney et al.'s (2010) research study suggest that the athletes' feelings of alienation are more due to race and athletic identity.

The next area to be explored was that of behavior. The point of the study was to investigate, through the stories of the participants, what it means to be a college football player. Discovering how they experience life, why they do what they do, why they act the way they do, how they describe what it means to be them; finding out about the behaviors that lead to academic success and/or failure are a big part of studies of this nature. Some of the student-athletes engaged in positive behaviors but typically it was only with the assistance of academic staff that provided them with mentors and tutors. Many books and websites exist on study skills and good student academic behavior but they tend to be more instructional than academic. Gayles and Hu (2009), in their research study on the influence of student engagement on student-athlete success, mention several important factors including class attendance, participation, interaction

with professors during office hours, and respecting diversity. The football group in this study does meet with faculty sponsors and two of them occasionally take part in initiatives by Black student organizations. Within the group, there was a considerable deficiency in those components thought necessary to be defined as true student engagement.

Harris (2000), reports on the disproportionate numbers of underprepared student-athletes who enter college and how the ratio of African-American males within that group is even higher. Given this predictor it is obviously important that this population give priority to academics and commit to being responsible students. Nevertheless, this group tended not to take this route. The Drake Group is a national consortium of faculty members formed to defend academic integrity in the face of burgeoning intercollegiate athletic excesses. One of the Drake Group's strongest proposals is to emphasize the importance of class attendance and mandate that athletic contests are not scheduled in conflict with class (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). Moore (2005) reports on the empirical relationship between regular class attendance and strong academic performance as well as the contemporary trend where professors and instructors reward attendance with attendance or participation points and pop quizzes. In this current study, all of the student-athletes admitted to missing class on numerous occasions yet never because of athletic competition. Reasons for this vary. As already mentioned, both physical and mental fatigue often caused these players to miss class. Additionally, participants occasionally offered poor time-management as an excuse for absenteeism. While these are all valid, the literature suggests some other possibilities.

In a lecture hall full of White students, a 300 pound Black man dressed in athletic apparel stands out. All of the participants in the study talked at length about how as athletes they felt they stood out in class. At the same time, they described the pride they felt in donning the expensive apparel provided to student-athletes and being recognized as athletes; the contradiction in terms is that the football players take pride in being athletes and desire the resultant attention yet academically they would rather hide.

The majority of the participants also talked about the alienation they felt as African-American student athletes in class, due to both their appearance and their perceived academic deficiencies. In their study of over 500 student-athletes, Simons et al. (2007) report that the majority of the participants' reported feelings of stigmatization from professors, instructors and other students. These feelings intensified for African-American student-athletes. Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) stated that in their NSSE study of more than 2400 student-athletes, the athletes were treated differently by professors, either positively or negatively. The authors further state that males, especially African-American males, describe a higher degree of negative perceptions and treatment. This is corroborated by the findings of many researchers in this area (Smith, 2007; Hawkins, 2000). On the other hand, Staurowsky and Ridpath report that it is the duty of faculty to advocate for the educational interests of all students and any singling out of student-athletes may be done with the best of intentions (2005). Faculty, according to Staurowsky and Ridpath, are merely reaching out to help a population in need. Another possible reason for missing classes is that of a fear of failure by student-athletes (Knapp et al., 2001). Athletes at the Division 1 level play at an incredibly high level and may have difficulty admitting to failure in any aspect of their lives. They are conditioned to

not fail with constant reinforcement from coaches and sports psychologists. This group of football players studied did not confess to any fear of failure, but they did mention the risk of letting down their friends and family. None ever mentioned any fear of letting down themselves, their team or their institution.

Coaches play a pivotal role in the success of student athletes and the next section will look at the interactions of the group of football players. How supportive are the coaches when it comes to academics? There are nine full time assistant football coaches at this institution, all report to the head coach. With turnover, it is likely that one or two move each year so the group in this study each had a position coach they reported to plus others that took on differing roles. All of the participants stated that they really liked the head coach but that they had very limited interactions with him and that all meaningful interactions were with the assistants. There were no reports that any of the coaches emphasized academics, while there were no explicit complaints that the coaches were unsupportive *per se*, the lack of positive support was telling. Ridpath (2006), states that the coaching staff, especially the head coach, play the most influential role in the academic success of any student-athlete.

Brown, Glastetter-Fender and Shelton (2000) report that for student-athletes, the coaches' take on a role of surrogate parents. The resultant power and control allows them to wield considerable influence over the student-athletes under their tutelage. The authors state that this leads to a dependence relationship between the student-athletes and their coaches. This state of reliance is particularly true for those student-athletes who are first generation students and unsure of the new environment. Brown et al. (2000) further comment on how this leads to a lack of development as young adults. Hawkins (2000)

reported on how some of the more controlling coaches would not let student-athletes think for themselves leading to stunted intellectual growth and the ability to think critically. Sharp and Sheilley (2008) report on how a coach's attitude sets the tone for the team and that academic achievement actually starts with the coach. They further discuss how intercollegiate athletics has become a pressure cooker for coaches, an environment where wins and losses take on more and more significance. Yet from the standpoint of higher education, academic excellence has to be the coach's priority.

In this study the student-athlete football players all commented on how the coaches were obsessed with winning, generally to the exclusion of all else, including academics. Although the days when football players graduated from college illiterate are presumably long gone, there are still too many student-athletes receiving short shrift in their education (Eitzen, 2009). Eitzen's studies report that coaches steer their student-athletes into less rigorous, easy courses and degrees, ones that Sperber (2000) calls "totally hollow degrees" (p. 246). Staurowsky and Ridpath (2005) discuss three cases in which star student-athletes have filed suit against their respective institutions because they were strongly encouraged to take easy academic loads. On the other hand, Potuto and O'Hanlon's study using the National Study for Student Engagement (NSSE) reports that 83 percent of student-athlete respondents chose a major unrelated to athletic pressure (2007). A limitation in this quantitative study is that these authors did not substantiate between differing teams or between academic risk factors when presenting this figure. It seems likely that football players who are considered academically troubled may not have answered in this way. In this research study, which considers the actual lived experiences of a group of football players, the participants cited anecdotal evidence that coaches were

using their influence to steer football players towards an easier academic path. While none of the participants explicitly shared that this had actually happened to them, there was a strong perception that they would incur the wrath of the coaching staff should they attempt more rigorous academic study.

When asked about their coaches, the participants often mentioned the recruiting process. This is an area which has become the subject of considerable debate among stakeholders in intercollegiate athletics. In fact, a round table paper was published in the fall 2006 that addressed many concerns with the current state of recruiting within intercollegiate athletics (Athletics, 2006). Areas discussed include: the lack of institutional involvement outside of the athletic department until very late in the admissions process, the ever increasing budget for intercollegiate athletics and the role therein that recruiting plays, the commoditization of student-athletes, and the ease of admission for marginal students.

Student-athletes begin to receive overtures from a very young age and often build up an inflated sense of importance. According to Shulman and Bowen (2001), recruitment of student-athletes at the highest levels has grown considerably over the years and has become a highly complex multi-million dollar industry. In this study, the student-athletes shared their frustrations and disappointments regarding the coaches who built them up during the recruiting period, then seemed to abandon them upon their arrival at school. Given the need for as smooth a transition as possible for the demographic of the student-athletes in this study this is potentially disastrous. Sperber (2000) cites this disconnect as being a reason for the lack of persistence among student-athletes. The round table paper on recruiting states that the recruiting wars have led to an

industry where sham transcripts are produced, bogus agents get rich, and academic values are mocked (2006). The findings in this study show that the recruiting issues contained in the literature are replicated here; the participants felt they had been misled and duped by the coaches during the recruiting process.

CHAPTER SEVEN: SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary and Conclusions

This concluding chapter will provide a summary of the preceding chapters of the dissertation. I will discuss the strengths and limitations of the study, and then present implications for practice for various stakeholders in intercollegiate athletics. Finally, consistent with the phenomenological tradition, I will close with my own thoughts.

Major Findings

The current study provided six football playing student-athletes the chance to discuss their lived academic experiences at a large university. There has been very little research done in this area, and it has been the goal of this study to survey the struggles of student-athletes to balance their academic lives with their roles as stars in a high profile sport. In-depth interviews with the participants provided a detailed look into the lives of these young men. By examining closely the lives of a few participants, more insight can be gained which compliments existing survey literature with a larger number of respondents.

No first year student-athletes were included in this study. By choosing participants who had at least one full year of college experience it was possible to obtain rich data that describes what it means to be a football student-athlete at this institution. Providing the student-athletes with an opportunity for their experiences to be heard has added to the richness of this study. Presenting the findings as they relate to existing literature has allowed me to see the value in the data. More pointedly, I have been able to gauge whether or not my findings are corroborated or not by previous studies. Working

in this field gives me the advantage of understanding some of the implications for practitioners and others stakeholders.

Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted with six individuals on one team at one institution and the data may not reflect the voices of different student-athletes at different colleges or universities. More students in the study, and additional interviews would have obtained more data. The research would also benefit from a longitudinal study, one where the participants are revisited in a year or two when they may have gained different perspectives on their academic lives and experiences and to see if they had been successful in their pursuits. A study which included different genders, races and sport teams would have added to the diversity of the study. There was no allowing for athletic success in this study. Further research could compare and contrast the academic performances of those who have collegiate careers with high degrees of excellence as opposed to those who do not blossom on the field of play or are restricted by injuries.

Although I cited earlier my job within an athletic department as an advantage to my research, there is some danger that my closeness to the field could become a limitation. I do not work at all with football student-athletes which helps to an extent, but my need to avoid prejudicial leanings based on my involvement was always a challenge. I believe that my own counseling background, as well as constant self-checks on how I was bracketing as a phenomenological researcher, helped to mitigate whatever limitations to which my proximity subjected me. As an older White male I clearly have some demographical obstacles to overcome while trying to bond with this group of

participants. Again, I believe I was successful in my attempts to rise above these; in part, this may have been due to this group's familiarity with older white coaches.

The sample was obtained during study hall and is a small representation of the group of student-athletes found there every night. Consequently, those agreeing to take part in this did so knowing that they would be heard and may have had agendas or grievances that they wanted to share. Another group may have come up with entirely different stories, and it is impossible to gauge each student-athlete's boundary with such limited interactions. Although the group seemed to share freely it is possible that trust limits were not fully extended and some information may have been withheld.

Implications for Professional Practice

The findings from this study have many practical implications for those involved with advancing, supporting, and promoting student-athletes. Recommendations and suggestions are offered for parents, high schools, Division 1 football coaching staffs, postsecondary administrators and faculty, athletic department administrators and staff, and administrators within the NCAA. The caveat for the recommendations is the size of the sample in this study. While the findings represented here are important one cannot transfer them into other groups.

Implications for Parents

Although all of the participants credit their parents or guardians with being supportive in their *other* endeavors, the lack of parental involvement in the athletes' academic lives is telling, both before and during college. The parents of this group of football players failed to recognize the significance of the opportunity awarded their sons.

With many cultural reasons for low academic interests in this population, the parents cannot be charged with full responsibility for their sons' low academic priorities. In the African-American communities, from where these student-athletes typically hail (four out of the six in this study), the focus on a life in professional sports has become an unrealistic dream, one similar to winning the lottery. If the parents could be a part of reversing this trend and take a hands-on approach to the education of their offspring, this trend could perhaps begin to be reversed.

During the college years, it is essential that parents be more involved in their sons' academic lives yet at the same time, as parents or guardians of first generation college students how do they grasp the significance? There is perhaps too much praise imparted for athletic accomplishments. If parents would encourage their children to perform in the classroom as vigorously as they do on the field of play, progress might ensue. Many of the participants commented on how their families professed total ignorance of the higher education experience. Some type of family education on the academic context of their children is necessary if these families are to provide the support the student-athletes need. Parents should also be very wary of having their children transfer high schools based solely on athletic opportunities. In this study James was the one student reporting transferring in high school for athletic reasons. Too many high school 'sports factories' are further stunting academic development, and student-athletes who attend college after attending such preparatory academies have focused too much on athletics.

Implications for High schools

There are multiple reasons that matriculating college students are unprepared, and although high schools may inherit issues from K-8 grades, it seems that high schools play the greatest role in educating youth. From the standpoint of student-athletes, particularly African-Americans, certain changes could be made to improve the academic experience. Teachers of student-athletes in high school need to have greater expectations and maintain higher standards. Passing students who are not prepared for the next level benefits no one, at least not over the long term. The participants in this study all discussed how easy high school had been for them academically and the contradiction that five of them did not gain direct admission to the university is significant. If a high school athlete is being recruited for college sports then the high school needs to play a role in college preparation.

Minority student-athletes do not seem to understand the ramifications of concentrating so much on a life in athletics. In lieu of this being reinforced at home, it has to become the duty of the public high schools to tend to it. Principals and administrators have to take away some of the power from the athletic departments and implement curriculums that stress academics.

Implications for Division 1 Football Coaches

This phenomenological study did not interact with any coaches so recommendations are made based on the existing literature and the interviews with six football players. Division 1 football coaches, especially those at the high revenue producing programs, must acknowledge the importance of the educational experience and reward excellence in the classroom. To fail to do so perpetuates the athletic focus that is

proving so problematic. None of the participants in the present study gave any indication that coaches took academics as anything but a hindrance. The research shows that often the academic culture on football teams is sadly lacking. If football coaches place more emphasis on academic achievement then more student-athletes would be driven to success in the classroom. Figures show that over time, professionals such as doctors, lawyers etc make more money than all but the highest achieving athletes and with less injury risk (Baum & Ma, 2007). Taking time to present this type of information would be highly beneficial. It is understood that coaches do from time to time take punitive measures when their team members transgress. The current physical sentences seem primitive in scope and are out of place on a university campus. To be fair to the coaches at this institution, academic accomplishments are posted prominently around the football complex.

Contemporary student-athletes are too insular; they tend to segregate themselves from the rest of the campus. Coaches need to become involved in changing this culture. They can begin to do so by encouraging campus participation as well as community interaction which will serve to enhance the university experience for student-athletes more than just athletic facilities. Several participants in this study stated they thoroughly enjoyed any community outreach they took part in and wished there were more. For the players who took part in African-American cultural events on campus, it was reported they had enjoyed that experience. The social lives of the football players, as they correctly stand, are badly out of balance. It is only by meeting non-athlete students that this can be addressed.

The recruiting process has many flaws and is an area where coaches need to make considerable changes. More pointedly, official recruiting has become an area where many false promises are made and recruits spend a disproportionate amount of their time on non-academic pursuits during their visit. Coaches need to focus more on the academic culture of the institution and have the majority, if not all, recruits meet with professors, deans and senior campus administrators. Senior athletic department administrators need to take more of a role in the recruiting field, and could schedule meetings with recruits.

Implications for Campus Administration and Faculty

Campus administrators, from the president down, must help ensure that athletic departments focus more on academics. Athletic directors should meet with campus leaders to work on ways to integrate the athletic department with the general university population. Giving athletic department leadership dual roles with campus duties would assist with this integration. Senior administrators should make an effort to meet with potential recruits and regularly follow up on those student-athletes who are admitted. If football players were to see that campus administration cared more about their academic progress they would feel less stigmatized. It is essential for faculty to take a leading role in these reforms.

Collectively, faculty should recognize that it is not *only* the fault of the high revenue student-athletes that they lack academic focus; it is often the result of years of enculturation in which they are merely doing what they think is expected. This recognition will hopefully serve to promote a more welcoming atmosphere within the classes and events that the student athletes attend. Professors and instructors should seek

out student-athletes enrolled in their classes to discuss expectations and offer positive reinforcement. This has to be an open interview, a forum that allows the student-athlete the opportunity to be forthright about their needs and expectations. There should be no mention of any athletic participation within the class in front of other students as few other groups are singled out like this and it is discriminatory. Faculty in higher education often take part in forums with groups of students such as GLBT, Greeks, minority groups etc. Doing something similar with student-athletes would be highly beneficial. Improvements to the current environment in higher education should result in an end of feelings of stereotyping by the student-athletes.

Implications for Athletic Departments

Athletic directors and head administrators must recognize that the pressure coaches feel to win is a great hindrance to the educational needs of many student-athletes, especially in the high revenue sports. Athletic administrators need to be more closely involved in the establishment of academic cultures within the department. They can accomplish this by meeting with recruits and freshmen during orientation and stressing academics, and be active in monitoring academic progress. Coaches need to be evaluated on academic success and student-athletes must be routinely interviewed to ensure that they are not being intentionally steered into an easy academic route. The coaches' involvement in the admissions process must be closely supervised, to ensure that special admission students can have a realistic chance at academic success and degrees.

Athletic directors need to assume more control of the coaching position, especially regarding the relationship with the institution and its mission. For many

coaches, particularly assistants attempting to climb through the ranks, their current position is only seen as a necessary stop gap on the way to something bigger and better. Athletic directors need to work with the coaching staffs closely, to assimilate them fully into the greater campus community. There is a need for more diversity on the football coaching staffs and the athletic directors have to take responsibility in improvement. With more African-American assistant and head coaches the Black student-athletes could have role models to assist them with their transition to college at a PWI.

Academic advisors and support staff are very involved in the day-to-day lives of the student-athletes and diversity within their ranks is encouraged. Many people filling these positions are former student-athletes and they can assist with the transition to college and all of the cultural issues experienced by African-Americans arriving at a PWI. There does have to be balance within the advising ranks however. Too many ex-athletes may turn the unit into an “old-boys” network, something that is already perceived by critics. If academic staff comes from student services areas of campus they can enforce campus academic expectations, as well as maintain stability with more long-term staff.

The academic support staff within the athletic department needs to reinforce academics consistently and praise academic success no matter how slight it is. Advisors cannot submit to coaching pressure to allow student-athletes to take an easier class load or declare an easier major. Advisors need to take the lead on campus involvement initiatives and should encourage student-athletes to meet with professors and departmental staff as often as possible to explore all of their academic options. The encouragement to attend life skills and development programs needs to begin with

advisors and be reinforced by coaches. Academic staff must look at each incoming special admit student-athlete to assess their needs for the transition to college. Bringing faculty together with student-athletes would also be beneficial as it would help eliminate the us-versus-them mentality that currently exists.

Implications for the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)

As intercollegiate athletics grow ever larger and is the subject of more intense media scrutiny, the pressure on the 18-23 year olds who play becomes even greater. For the academically underprepared college student this becomes even more problematic. NCAA eligibility rules were set up with the best of intentions to protect student-athletes from exploitation where they would play for four years and leave without degrees. For student-athletes who struggle to find their niche academically these same rules can also impede them in their progress to a meaningful degree. Degree progress as defined by the NCAA means that students have to hit degree benchmarks in order to continue with their eligibility. Many student-athletes who fit the demographic of the participants in this study are placed into easier classes initially because to do otherwise would set them up for failure. As they progress through their college careers they have already burned bridges regarding rigorous majors and have no choice but to remain in easier degrees. The NCAA has to work to remedy this with potential reforms. A thorough investigation of ways in which to help the student-athletes fulfill reasonable academic goals should be a priority for the governing body. Intercollegiate athletics is a billion dollar industry and spending more assisting student-athletes obtain meaningful educations needs to become a priority.

Implications for Future Research

As previously mentioned there is a paucity of material in the published literature regarding academically at-risk student-athletes. Research into student-athletes rarely splits by sport and the difference between those participating in the revenue sports versus the non-revenue sports needs to be addressed. The more athletes in general are seen to fail to achieve in the classroom, the more pressure will fall on everyone connected with intercollegiate athletics. As the academic abilities of high profile student-athletes become more and more the focus of media attention, further studies, both quantitative and qualitative are needed.

Research into this population at other institutions with similar athletic structures and aspirations would help identify patterns. For a different perspective, smaller Division 1 universities would be productive objects of inquiry, because many of the head coaches at these institutions aspire toward advancement and the coach/student-athlete relationship would be of great value to study. Do things change as athletics has less media attention? Studies into the lower divisions would be productive to find areas where the different demographics of institutions would have similarities or variation.

As stated in the literature review, there is a lack of research into the post-college lives of student-athletes. Discovering what students who graduate do with their degrees would have important ramifications for future advising of football players. Students who leave without completing their degrees could also be studied to see what becomes of them.

Studies could also be conducted with student-athletes from different populations. What are the differences between gender, race, socio-economic classes etc? It is highly likely that commonalities will exist between many student-athlete groups across demographics regarding behaviors, aspirations, and attitudes. Studies into all of these areas would offer a large contribution to the existing literature. Comparing and contrasting this research would yield findings that could better assist and advise intercollegiate student-athletes as a group, regardless of demographic group or sport. The persistence and retention of this group of football players would be interesting to follow; a longitudinal study would have considerable merit with this group as well as others of similar demographic backgrounds.

Closing

Although I do not work anymore with football players, being around these young men made me realize how rewarding (and yet frustrating) my occupation can be. It is also apparent to me that I work in an industry that is careening out of control, like a cannon careening down a hill and gaining unstoppable momentum. Based on this study, I am rooting for these young men and hope all their dreams come true. I am not confident, however that their educational experiences here will take them far.

APPENDIX A

Greetings:

My name is Scott Maxwell and I am currently a Ph.D. student in Higher Education and Student Affairs in the Indiana University School of Education. Over the next few months I will be conducting research on the experiences of student-athletes here at Indiana University. I am looking for students on the football team who are at least sophomores in standing and who are required to complete study tables. You would be interviewed for approximately one hour in duration and may be contacted later to clear up any confusion in your interview. All interviews will be tape recorded and then transcribed. The tapes will then be destroyed. Your participation will be confidential. Your participation in this study will enhance the body of knowledge in higher education. If you have any questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach me by email at rsmaxwel@indiana.edu

Sincerely.

Scott Maxwell

Doctoral Candidate

Higher Education & Student Affairs

APPENDIX B
RB Study #XX-XXXXX

INDIANA UNIVERSITY BLOOMINGTON

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

The lived experiences of football player student-athletes.

You are invited to participate in a research study of student-athletes and their lived academic experiences. You were selected as a possible subject because you are a current Indiana University student-athlete attending football study tables. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is being conducted by Scott Maxwell, an athletic department advisor and graduate student in the Indiana University School of Education.

STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to attempt to understand the lived academic experiences of a group of Indiana University football player student-athletes who are academically struggling.

NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

If you agree to participate, you will be one of between six and ten subjects who will be participating in this research.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:

Take part in audio taped interviews lasting around one hour in duration about your academic experiences

Possibly do short follow up interviews in person or by telephone to clarify points from the first interview

RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

While on the study, the risks/side effects are are:

The risks of being uncomfortable answering some questions during the interviews

The risks of possible loss of confidentiality

You can tell the researcher that you feel uncomfortable and do not care to answer a particular question.

All interviews will be conducted in private, no names will be used, and all tape recordings will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study

BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

The benefits to participation that are reasonable to expect are: you may personally identify ways to be a better student, and future cohorts may be assisted positively as a result of this study.

ALTERNATIVES TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

Instead of being in the study, you have these options:

An alternative to participating is not to participate.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published and in databases where records may be stored. Tape recordings will remain in the possession of the researcher until the conclusion of the study when they will be destroyed.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the IUB Institutional Review Board or its designees, (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), if applicable,, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) [for research funded or supported by NIH], etc., who may need to access your medical and/or research records.

COSTS

Taking part in this study will lead to no added costs to you.

PAYMENT

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study

CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study or a research-related injury, contact the researcher Scott Maxwell at 812-856-4433.

For questions about your rights as a research participant or to discuss problems, complaints or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information, or offer input, contact the IUB Human Subjects office, 530 E Kirkwood Ave, Carmichael Center, L03, Bloomington IN 47408, 812-855-3067 or by email at iub_hsc@indiana.edu

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with the investigator(s). If you choose to leave the study early you will be given the opportunity to receive the audio tapes containing your interviews. If you decline the tapes and all transcripts will be destroyed by the researcher.

SUBJECT'S CONSENT

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study.

I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

Subject's Printed Name: _____

Subject's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____
(must be dated by the subject)

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____ **Date:** _____

****NOTE:** Printed name lines are optional.

APPENDIX C: OPEN ENDED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) Share your experiences as a student and an athlete before coming to this university.
- 2) How would you describe the attention and support you received for accomplishment in athletics?
- 3) Tell me how members of the team treat academics?
- 4) Tell me how you treat academics?
- 5) Talk about times when you engaged in behaviors that helped you earn better grades
- 6) Talk about times when you engaged in behaviors that you knew would hurt your grades
- 7) Are the members of the coaching staff supportive of your academics?
- 8) Are members of the coaching staff unsupportive of your academics?

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college sports. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

RESUME

Experienced student affairs practitioner with significant experience working with diverse student populations. Extensive experience integrating athletes into the institutional living and learning experience, liaising with offices of Disability Services, First-Year Experience, International Student Services, Diversity Education and Student Ethics. Familiarity with running study tables and creating learning environments; ability to prepare and present data reflecting departmental successes.

EDUCATION:

Indiana University-**Ph.D.**: Higher Education and Student Affairs (minor Counseling). 2011

San Diego State University-**MA**: Counseling. 2000

San Diego State University-**BA**: English. 1999

San Diego City College-**AA**: Liberal Arts. 1997

CAREER HISTORY:

DIRECTOR OF RETENTION AND LEARNING SERVICES, Department of Intercollegiate Athletics, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN (2004-present)

Manage all aspects of learning initiatives in a large Division One athletic department, oversee and hire mentors and tutors.

Advise student-athletes in five varsity sports in areas of class selection eligibility, compliance, and choosing a major.

Screen all incoming student-athletes at matriculation and assess learning needs.

Serve as resource for advising staff on issues related to disadvantaged students.

Work one-on-one with all sports with academically at-risk students, probation students and liaison with campus disability services.

Identify learning styles and assist students in adapting to those.

Integrate learning opportunities with other units on campus.

Meet with medical staff and psychologists to plan and discuss mental health issues.

Liaise with campus University Division and programs related to probation and first year experience.

Meet with Adaptive Technology Services to ensure technology needs are being met for students with needs.

Work with learning resources campus wide such as libraries, career services and academic support centers.

Coordinate diversity training for student-athletes with the campus Diversity Educator.

Serve on planning committee for campus-wide first year experience conference.

Work with all sports in recruiting potential student-athletes describing eligibility needs, NCAA requirements, and institutional information.

ASSOCIATE INSTRUCTOR, Student Academic Center, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN (2001-2004)

Classroom instructor in the following courses offered by the School of Education at Indiana University:

X150-Managing resources for learning. Class for underclassmen to learn college success strategies.

C750-Alcohol abuse on college campuses. Assist professor as teaching assistant in class dealing with alcohol issues.

U212-Intercollegiate athletics. History and current dilemmas within the topic.

X153-Critical reading. Teach class of first generation, entering freshmen critical thinking skills and adjustment issues.

X158-Culture of college. Class restricted to students on academic probation dealing with college success skills.

X156-College and lifelong learning. Meet with students individually and in small groups to discuss learning skills.

Present workshops to small and large student audiences relating to a variety of college success strategies including study skills, time management, motivation, and major choices.

PROJECT ASSOCIATE-CSEQ, Center for Postgraduate Studies, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN (2000-2001).

Graduate assistant to program director, Dr. George Kuh. The CSEQ is an international research program that surveys the quality of student's college experiences. Assist Dr. Kuh in the day to day running of the project, dealing with academics enquiring about the program. Analyze data and produce reports for institutions, use the collective data to produce scholarly reports.

COMPUTER EXPERIENCE:

Familiarity with a variety of programs including Word, Access, Excel, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), People Soft, Foxpro and extensive knowledge of the World Wide Web and research databases.

